

Topic: Interviewing Trainee Handout



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Topic Objectives

At the end of this topic, you will be able to:

1. Recall what to expect during the interview.
2. Discuss how to prepare for the interview.
3. Discriminate between the different types of interviews.
4. Prepare answers for some of the toughest interview questions.
5. Utilize the STAR approach to answer Performance-Based Interview (PBI) questions.
6. Discuss follow-up tasks that you should complete after the interview.

Interview Information



CONGRATULATIONS! Your strong resume and cover letter have helped you cross the threshold ... you are now scheduled for an interview with the company. Although you haven't secured a job yet, you are well on your way. Here are some tips to make sure you stay on track.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Preparation is *key* in a successful interview. Before you go into any interview, be sure you have carefully prepared yourself in each of the following:

Research the Company

Always research the company beforehand. It's only beneficial for you to learn more about your possible future place of employment and it will help you prepare for certain interview questions such as "What do you know about our company?", "Why do you want to work here?" or "Do you have any questions for us?" There are a variety of resources to utilize, including the company's Website, annual reports, trade organizations and journals, the Internet, or people who work there. At the very least you should know the industry, the company's products or services, and their competitors. It's also a good idea to look at the company biographies, in order to get a feel for the company culture as well as perhaps learn something about your interviewer.

Interview Questions

Practice makes perfect, so before you go into the interview you should know what questions to expect and be prepared on how to answer them.

Although you should acquire a list of expected questions and practice answering each one, here are some general guidelines for dealing with interview questions.

- *Be concise and direct.* Answer the question but don't ramble on and lose the interviewer's attention. If you don't know how to answer right away, stall a little bit or ask them to clarify the question so you will better understand what they're looking for.
- *Be honest.* Don't lie about potential pitfalls in your resume or job experience. Instead, admit the discrepancy and either steer the conversation towards your skills and experience that you want to highlight or put a positive spin on things. For example: "Although I have not been employed for the past two years, I have been furthering my education and involving myself in community service."
- *Give an example/Tell a story.* You can usually expect at least one behavioral question in your interview. Examples would include "Tell me about a time when you ..." or "Can you give me an example when you ..." The trick to answering these questions is to present an example or tell a story that demonstrates the abilities the interviewer is looking for, and your effectiveness in applying those skills (i.e. the result).

In general, you should shoot for PAR.

- **Problem:** What is the situation or task that you had to address?
- **Action:** What action did YOU specifically take?
- **Result:** How did it end? What did you accomplish? How does this demonstrate your capabilities?

NOTE: you will also see this written as STAR (situation/task, action, and result).

- *Tell Me About Yourself.* One of the most frequently asked questions. You know they don't want a story of your childhood, but what do they want? Todd Anten of Yahoo! HotJobs suggests that you prepare an answer that addresses the following points:
 - What are your key accomplishments from previous jobs?
 - What strengths are demonstrated by those accomplishments?
 - How do they relate to the job for which you're applying?

Consider this your personal statement and constantly practice until you have it down cold. More information is available at

http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/tools/interviews/How_to_Answer_the_Four_Most_Common_Interview_Questions_20021018-1721-us.html.

- *Strengths and Weaknesses.* Usually, most people have no trouble identifying their strengths. They just have to be sure those characteristics are relevant to the job position. Weaknesses, on the other hand, are more troublesome to discuss. Try to choose a weakness that is really a strength or a weakness that is understandable or relatively harmless. Be forewarned that "I'm a perfectionist and workaholic" is considered overused. Again, be sure to choose a weakness that is work-related, and ideally be able to explain what you have done to overcome it. An example would be, "I'm not the most organized person around, so I make sure to return all phone messages and e-mails right away. I also use a personal organizer, and so far it's worked wonderfully to keep me on track."
- *Don't provide negative information,* either about a disability, failures or previous employers/employees. Especially concerning the latter, no matter how horrible your former boss was, you should not badmouth him or her since that would lead to the interviewer viewing you as a troublemaker or worse. Instead, stay positive and demonstrate your professionalism.
- *Salary questions.* As much as we'd like to shoot for the moon on high salary requests, we know that it's probably not going to happen. So what should you do when the interviewer asks you what salary you're looking for?

First of all, do some research beforehand to determine a salary range for the position you're interviewing for. Check out online job calculators such as www.salary.com or careeronestop.org, or look for listings in industry associations and government reports. You can also ask people you know in the industry or occupation. Keep in mind that salaries can differ depending on geographic location and the employer type (i.e., non-profit vs. for profit, private vs. government).

Now, even though you're armed with your salary range, you should avoid being the first one to name a number. Try to get employers to do that. If they ask you what your previous salary was, you should emphasize the worth of your skills and how they would be beneficial to the company. If they really press you for a number, either say your salary is negotiable or give them a range, depending on the salary range you've researched, and how much you'd like to make. Finally, remember that salary isn't an

absolute number since company benefits, such as insurance or vacation days, should also be factored in.

For more information on answering the salary question:

- <http://content.salary.monster.com/articles/moneyqs/>
- http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/tools/benefits/How_to_Determine_Your_Salary_Range_2004421-1719-us.html

- *Do you have any questions for me?*

No matter what, do not simply say “No.” It shows that you’re not serious about the position or don’t really care about the company. Remember, you’re interviewing them as much as they’re interviewing you; both sides want a good fit. Fortunately for you, you’ve done some research and therefore can reel off questions about the company, the position or the industry. Try to avoid asking obvious questions or something that has been covered thoroughly in the interview, and *never* ask about salary or benefits until you’re offered the job.

For examples of questions you could ask, visit:

- http://www.quintcareers.com/asking_interview_questions.html
- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/questionstoask/>
- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/anyquestions/>

Again, come up with responses to these questions before the interview, and then practice answering them over and over again. For samples of other popular interview questions, check out http://www.quintcareers.com/interview_questions.html.

For more tips on answering questions, go to:

- http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/tools/interviews/How_to_Answer_the_Four_Most_Common_Interview_Questions_20021018-1721-us.html
- http://www.jobweb.com/Resources/Library/Interviews/Interviewers_92_01.htm

INTERVIEWING WITH A DISABILITY

Disclosure

A common concern is the issue of whether or not to disclose one's disability, and if so, how? This is a highly personal decision, and should be made on a case by case basis. However you decide to handle the issue, it will help you to have a plan in advance and be prepared.

Generally, employers want workers who they can rely on and who have the skills, background and abilities to get the job done. When and if you discuss your disability to a potential employer, you will want to emphasize your Abilities and describe how you'll get the job done, especially if you will use methods and tools unfamiliar to the employer.

If you have a visible disability or need an accommodation for your interview, you may not. It's possible that the employer has no experience or knowledge of your disability and may have inaccurate notions of what you can and cannot do. You may benefit from bringing up the issue first and putting the employer at ease. Making a positive statement about your disability may dispel any doubts or misconceptions the employer may have. Here is one example of how a candidate addressed the issue of his disability during an interview:

- “As I am sure you’ve noticed, I am blind. I often meet people who have never met someone with a visual impairment and wonder how I am able to do everyday things and work. Since I am unable to drive, I get around using public transportation and the taxi system, which, incidentally, comes directly to this office. I use a cane when I walk around and can get around on my own once I have a quick tour of a new place. The position description states that this job requires advanced knowledge of the Microsoft Office Suite. I previously worked as an administrative assistant in a busy office for two years where I regularly produced PowerPoint presentations, Word documents Excel spreadsheets, handled the phones and emails. I use a screen reading software that reads the necessary information off the screen to me and allows me to access everything by keyboard. I have headphones I wear so I don’t disturb co-workers but keep the volume low so I can still talk with others and answer the phone.”

For More Information on Disclosing Disability:

- http://www.esight.org/view_search.cfm?x=631
- <http://www.bu.edu/cpr/jobschool/disclosing.htm>
- <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/corner/vol01iss13.htm>
- http://www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=86&subcat_id=6

Know your rights

For a brief overview of the ADA and employment issues, visit <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/links/ADAq&a.html>.

To see a sampling of the difference between legal and illegal questions, look at

- http://www.jobweb.com/Resources/Library/Interviews/Preemployment_199_01.htm.
- <http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/preemp.html>

If you feel that you have been discriminated against in your employment, contact your local Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and read http://www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=126&subcat_id=6).

Handling inappropriate questions

In general, there are three ways to deal with inappropriate questions.

- *You can answer the question.* Sounds simple and you get the situation out of the way. However, only do so if you are comfortable answering the question, and be aware that the information you provide might come back to haunt you.
- *You can refuse to answer the question.* You inform the interviewer that that question is potentially illegal and not relevant to the job description. However, being too direct might put you at odds with the interviewer, so don’t resort to this unless the questions are truly offensive.
- *You don’t answer the question and instead address the intent or concern behind the question.* This way you attend to the interviewer’s worries without forfeiting your rights. Emphasize your skills and experience, and direct the conversation back to how qualified you are for the job. An example would be if they ask you “Do you have a disability that requires you to go to the doctor often?” Realize that the interviewer is worried about your attendance, so reassure them that you are just as responsible as the next person and can provide a list of references that will vouch for your high attendance records. Again, you don’t necessarily state your disability, but rather address their concern and mention positive characteristics, such as responsibility, organizational skills, etc.

Other Links for Handling Illegal Questions:

- [http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/tools/interviews/How to Handle Illegal Interview Questions_20021118-1632-us.html](http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/tools/interviews/How_to_Handle_Illegal_Interview_Questions_20021118-1632-us.html)
- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/illegalqs/>

THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

Dress

First impressions are made within thirty seconds, and how you look is a critical component to how an interviewer perceives you. You want to “look the part,” so dress appropriately to the position you’re interviewing for or suitable to the culture of the company. Usually this consists of a neat and conservative business suit. For women who choose a skirted suit, the skirt should be a little below the knee. You should wear clean and polished dress shoes, have clean and trimmed nails and hair, no cologne or perfume, minimal jewelry, and any accessories should match your suit. Overall, just use common sense and present yourself as a professional who is ready to get to work.

Other links:

- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/success/>
- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/whattowear/>
- http://www.quintcareers.com/dress_for_success.html

What to Bring

You’ve decided to bring the perfect briefcase or purse, but there is only one problem: it’s completely empty. What do you bring to an interview besides your sparkling personality? Bring several copies of your resume, printed on resume paper and placed in a folder of some kind so they are not crumpled in any way. If necessary, you might want to bring a portfolio containing samples of your past work or writing samples.

In addition, you should bring a list of references and a notepad to take notes during the interview. This shows that not only are you serious about the job, but any notes will be helpful in composing your thank you letter after the interview. Finally, if you bring a cell phone, make sure it is off or the ring tone is silent. If you think people are annoyed when a cell phone interrupts their movie, wait until you see a potential boss’ reaction when you interrupt an interview!

Now that you’ve prepared a game plan, it’s time to act on it! Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind:

- Come 10-15 minutes early and never more than 15 minutes early. Make sure you know ahead of time how to get there and have arranged appropriate transportation.
- During introductions, smile and give a firm handshake.
- Maintain eye contact. You don’t have to stare at them nonstop, as if you’re giving them the third degree. Instead, constantly keep eye contact and occasionally break away. Avoid looking at the floor though, since it could be seen as a sign of dishonesty or submissiveness.
- Project positive body language. You want to show them that you’re paying attention and are interested in the employer. This might include sitting straight, not fidgeting and leaning slightly forward occasionally throughout the interview.

- Relax! The company's already demonstrated its interest in you by inviting you in for an interview and you've prepared yourself thoroughly for whatever they might throw at you. Just relax and be yourself, which is what they're really looking for anyway.

Finally, at the end of the interview, it is important that you close the sale. Like your resume, the interview is an opportunity for you to sell yourself to the company. However, it's not enough to just list all the benefits and wait for the customer to throw money your way. Instead, you want to conclude by doing the following:

- Restate your interest in the position and company. You might also want to remind them of three to five skills you previously mentioned that you'd like for them to remember.
- Ask what the next step is so you'll know what to do and when the decision will be made so you'll know how long you'll have to wait.
- Ask them how you can contact them, just in case you don't hear back from them.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Immediately following the interview, you should sit down and list your immediate feelings and thoughts about how it went. This not only helps you to work on your next interview but also it is useful for composing your thank-you letter.

The art of letter writing is largely forgotten today and gives you a great opportunity to stand out of the crowd applicants. For those who do want to follow up on their interview, it's recommended that you send a typed or handwritten letter through the mail. It is usually more thoughtful, more professional and enduring. Besides, people are usually deluged with e-mails and phone messages and might not pay attention to another. However, you should also go by the company culture. If everything seems to be done via e-mail, then by all means send a thank-you using e-mail.

Now, what do you say in a thank-you letter? You want to thank the interviewer for their time and interest in you. Other than that, just think of this as the last opportunity you have to sell yourself to the employer. Try to reiterate the most pertinent points you made in the interview or ones you forgot to make. Finally, you want to restate your skills and how they are a perfect fit for the position.

Examples of Thank-You Letters:

- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/notes/letter4/>
- <http://susanireland.com/thankyouletters/interview1.html>

Basic Interviewing Hints:

- <http://www.csun.edu/~sp20558/dis/shcontents.html>
- <http://interview.monster.com/articles/prepare/>
- <http://www.hotjobs.com/htdocs/tools/interviews/index-us.htm>

Dressing for Success

(Appropriate Attire for the Interview)

For Men

Suit: A conservative two-piece dark suit.

Pressed Shirt: A long-sleeved white shirt is best, but a blue shirt could also be considered. (Never wear a short-sleeved shirt even in the summer.)

Tie: Choose an updated, subdued silk tie.

Socks/Dress Shoes: All socks should reach your mid-calf. Dress shoes should be conservative and should match your belt. Never wear casual shoes like hush puppies, penny loafers or sneakers.

Close shave or well-groomed facial hair

Clean nails

Cologne: Minimal is best.



For Women

Professional skirt suit or pantsuit: Navy, grey, taupe and black are good conservative colors. No mini-skirts.

Pressed blouse

Hosiery/Closed-toe and closed heel shoes: Hosiery adds a finished look. Wear neutral colored or skin-toned hosiery. A classic pump in a conservative color is best. Shoes should have an appropriate heel height of no more than 3 inches. Shoes must always be clean and polished.

Light Jewelry: Wear no more than one ring on each hand unless it is a wedding ring set. No dangling jewelry. Think simple but elegant.

Makeup/Nails: Makeup should look natural. Nails should be well manicured. Clear polish or a French manicure is the most natural looking.

Handbag, portfolio and briefcase: Should be conservative in color and in good condition.

Perfume: Minimal is best.



The First 10 Minutes Are Top Priority

Tom Musbach, Yahoo! HotJobs

First impressions are critical during the hiring process.

In fact, many executives said they form an opinion about hiring a candidate within 10 minutes, despite spending nearly an hour in the actual interview, according to a recent poll by [Robert Half Finance & Accounting](#).

"The job seeker needs to remember that he or she is being assessed from the minute after walking in the door of the company," says Julie Jansen, career coach and author of "You Want Me to Work with Who?" "The receptionist could make an impromptu comment later to the interviewer about something the candidate did or said."

Experts recommend the following tips to make the best impression during the opening minutes of a [job interview](#).

Before the Interview

- Ask someone close to you to assess you for body language, appearance and overall demeanor, says Jansen. "Maybe you don't realize that you twirl your hair on your finger when you're nervous or that you lick your lips or forget to smile."
- Dress the way the boss or interviewer would dress. "Any dressier makes you look like you're trying too hard or are out of sync with that workplace's culture," says career expert Marty Nemko, author of "Cool Careers for Dummies." "To find out what the boss wears, simply ask the person who contacted you to schedule your interview."
- Get to the interview location early. "Sit in your car and mentally visualize or 'rehearse' how you'll greet the interviewer," says Richard Phillips, career coach and owner of Advantage Career Solutions in Palo Alto, California. "This is the same thing that slalom skiers do before the race. Envision yourself making a good impression, and chances are you will."
- Do your homework. Research the company, and learn about its products and services. Read the job description very carefully and know specifically what you have to offer, says Phillips. "Interviewers will quickly write off a candidate as lazy when they don't have basic and easily available information."

During the Interview

- Convey enthusiasm. "If the interviewer asks how you are, reply, 'I'm well and really looking forward to learning about the job and the company,'" says Phillips. "Never tell the interviewer you feel nervous."
- Ask a wise question early in the interview. "For example, 'In the end, what is most important in doing this job well?'" says Nemko. "That shows your intelligence and self-confidence in being willing to ask questions early. It also essentially gives you the answer to the test -- it tells you what to stress in the rest of the interview."
- Tell a "PAR story" Nemko advises candidates to look for an opportunity in the first few minutes to tell a three-part story. "In a PAR story, you tell of a Problem you faced, how you Approached it, and the positive Resolution." (**NOTE:** you will also see this written as STAR (situation/task, action, and result)).
- Stick to basic etiquette rules. "Sit up straight, don't fidget, smile politely, and speak when spoken to," Phillips concludes. "And don't fall into the trap of thinking that just because the interviewer is informal, you can follow suit. Remember that they're in their own environment, and you are a guest."

How to Answer the 64 Toughest Interview Questions

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General Guidelines in Answering Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself
2. What are your greatest strengths?
3. What are your greatest weaknesses?
4. Tell me about something you did - or failed to do - that you now feel a little ashamed of.
5. Why are you leaving (or did you leave) this position?
6. The "Silent Treatment"
7. Why should I hire you?
8. Aren't you overqualified for this position?
9. Where do you see yourself five years from now?
10. Describe your ideal company, location and job
11. Why do you want to work at our company?
12. What are your career options right now?
13. Why have you been out of work so long?
14. Tell me honestly about the strong points and weak: points your boss (company, management team, etc.)
15. What good books have you read lately?
16. Tell me about a situation when your work was criticized
17. What are your outside interests?
18. The "Fatal Flaw" question
19. How do you feel about reporting to a younger person (woman, minority, etc.)?
20. On confidential matters
21. Would you lie for the company?
22. Looking back, what would you do differently in your life?
23. Could you have done a better in your last job?
24. Can you work under pressure?
25. What makes you angry?
26. Why aren't you earning more money at this stage of your career?
27. Who has inspired you in your life, and why?
28. What was the toughest decision you ever had to make?
29. Tell me about the most boring job you've ever had
30. Have you been absent from work more than a few days in any previous position?
31. What changes would you make if you came on board?
32. I'm concerned that you don't have as much experience as we'd like in...
33. How do you feel about working nights and weekends?
34. Are you willing to relocate or travel?
35. Do you have the stomach to fire people? Have you had experience in firing many people?
36. Why have you had so many jobs?
37. What do you see as the proper role/mission of...?
38. What would you say to your boss if he's crazy about an idea, but you think it stinks?
39. How could you have improved your career progress?
40. What would you do if a fellow executive on your own corporate level wasn't pulling his or her weight and this was hurting your department?
41. You've been with your firm a long time. Won't it be hard switching to a new company?
42. May I contact your present employer for a reference?

43. Give me an example of your creativity (analytical skill, managing ability, etc.)
44. Where could you use some improvement?
45. What do you worry about?
46. How many hours a week do you normally work?
47. What's the most difficult part of being a (job title)?
48. The "Hypothetical Problem"
49. What was the toughest challenge you've ever faced?
50. Have you considered starting your own business?
51. What are your goals?
52. What do you look for when you hire people?
53. Sell me this stapler
54. "The Salary Question" - How much money do you want?
55. The Illegal Question
56. The "Secret" Illegal Question
57. What was the toughest part of your last job?
58. How do you define success...and how do you measure up to your Own definition?
59. "The Opinion Question"
60. If you won a \$10 million lottery, would you still work?
61. Looking back on your last position, have you done your best work?
62. Why should I hire you from the outside when I could promote someone from within?
63. Tell me something negative you've heard about our company
64. On a scale of one to ten, rate me as an interviewer

General Guidelines in Answering Interview Questions

Everyone is nervous in interviews. If you simply *allow* yourself to feel nervous, you'll do much better. Remember also that it's difficult for the interviewer as well. In general, be upbeat, positive. Never be negative.

Rehearse your answers and time them. Never talk for more than two minutes straight. Don't try to memorize answers word for word. Use the answers shown here as a guide only, and don't be afraid to include your own thoughts and words. To help you remember key concepts jot down and review a few key words for each answer. Rehearse your answers frequently and they will come to you naturally in interviews.

As you will read in the accompanying report, the single most important strategy in interviewing, as in all phases of your job search, is what we call, "*The Greatest Executive Job Finding Secret*". And that is...

Find out what people want, then show them How YOU can help them get it.

Find out what an employer wants most in his or her ideal candidate, then show how you meet those qualifications.

In other words, you must match your abilities with the needs of the employer. You must sell what the buyer is buying. To do that, before you know what to emphasize in your answers, you must find out what the buyer is buying...what he is looking for. And the best way to do that is to ask a few questions yourself.

You'll see how to bring this off skillfully as you read the first two questions of this report. But regardless of how you accomplish it, you must remember this strategy above all: *before blurting out your qualifications, you must get some idea of what the employer wants most.* Once you know what he wants, you can then present your qualifications as the perfect "key" that fits the "lock" of that position.

Other important interview strategies:

- Turn weaknesses into strengths. (You'll see how to do this" in a few moments.)
- Think before you answer. A pause to collect your thoughts is a hallmark of a thoughtful person.
- As a daily exercise, practice being more optimistic. For example, just as an exercise in your daily life, try putting a positive spin on events and situations you would normally regard as negative. This is not meant to turn you into a Pollyanna, but to sharpen your selling skills. The best salespeople, as well as the best-liked interview candidates, come off as being naturally optimistic, "can-do" people. You will dramatically raise your level of attractiveness by daily practicing to be more optimistic.
- Be honest...never lie.
- Keep an interview diary. Right after each interview, note what you did right, what could have gone a little better, and what steps you should take next with this contact. Then take those steps. Don't be like the 95% of humanity who say they will follow up on something, but never do.

About the 64 Questions...

You might feel that the answers to the following questions are "canned", and that they will seldom match up with the exact way you are asked the questions in actual interviews. The questions and answers are designed to be as specific and realistic as possible. But no preparation can anticipate thousands of possible variations on these questions.

What's important is that you thoroughly familiarize yourself with the main strategies behind each answer. And it will be invaluable to you *if* you commit to memory a few key words that let you instantly call to mind your best answer to the various questions. If you do this, and follow the principles of successful interviewing presented here, you're going to do very well.

Good luck...and good job-hunting!

Q. #1 Tell me about yourself...

TRAPS: Beware - about 80% of all interviews begin with this 'innocent' question. Many candidates, unprepared for the question, skewer themselves by rambling, recapping their life story, delving into ancient work history or personal matters.

BEST ANSWER: Start with the *present* and tell why you are well qualified for the position. Remember that the key to all successful interviewing is to match your qualifications to what the interviewer is looking for. In other words, **you must sell what the buyer is buying. This is the single most important strategy in executive job hunting.**

So, before you answer this or *any* question, it's imperative that you try to uncover your interviewer's greatest need, want, problem or goal. To do so, make sure you take these two steps:

(1) Do all the homework you can *before* the interview to uncover this person's wants and needs (not the generalized needs of the industry or company).

(2) As early as you can in the interview, ask for a more complete description of what the position entails. You might say: "I have a number of accomplishments I'd like to tell you about, but I want to make the best use of our time together and talk directly to your needs. To help me do that, could you tell me more about the most important priorities of this position? All I know is what I (heard from the recruiter...read in the classified ad, etc.)"

Then ALWAYS follow up with a second and possibly third question to draw out his needs even more. Surprisingly, it's usually this *second* or *third* question that unearths what the interviewer is *most* looking for.

You might ask simply, "And in addition to that?", or, "Is there anything else you see as essential to success in this position?"

This process will not feel easy or natural at first, because it is easier simply to *answer* questions. But only if you uncover the employer's wants and needs will your answers make the most sense. If you practice asking these key questions before giving your answers, the process will feel more natural and *you* will be light years ahead of the other job' candidates you're competing with.

After uncovering what the employer is looking for, describe why the needs of this job bear striking parallels to tasks you've succeeded at before. Be sure to illustrate with specific examples of your responsibilities and especially your achievements, all of which are geared to present yourself as a perfect match for the needs he has just described.

Q. #2 What are your greatest strengths?

TRAPS: this question seems like a softball lob, but be prepared. You don't want to come across as egotistical or arrogant. Neither is this a time to be humble.

BEST ANSWER: You know that your key strategy is to first uncover your interviewer's greatest wants and needs before you answer questions. And from Question #1, you know how to do this.

Prior to any interview, you should have a list mentally prepared of your greatest strengths. You should also have a specific example or two which illustrates each strength, an example chosen from your most recent and most impressive achievements.

You should have this list of your greatest strengths and corresponding examples from your achievements so well committed to memory that you can recite them cold after being shaken awake at 2:30 AM.

Then, once you uncover your interviewer's greatest wants and needs, you can choose those achievements from your list that best match up.

As a general guideline, the 10 most desirable traits that all employers love to see in their executives are:

- 1) A proven track record as an achiever...especially if your achievements match up with the employer's greatest wants and needs...
- 2) Intelligence...management "savvy".
- 3) Honesty...integrity...a decent human being.
- 4) Good fit with corporate culture...someone to feel comfortable with...a team player who meshes well with interviewer's team.
- 5) Likability...positive attitude...sense of humor.
- 6) Good communications skills.
- 7) Dedication...willingness to walk the extra mile to achieve excellence.
- 8) Definiteness of purpose...clear goals.
- 9) Enthusiasm...high level of motivation.
- 10) Confident...healthy...a leader.

Q. #3 What are your greatest weaknesses?

TRAPS: Beware - this is an "eliminator" question, designed to shorten the candidate list. Any admission of a weakness or fault will earn you an "A" for honesty, but an "F" for the interview.

PASSABLE ANSWER: Disguise a strength as a weakness.

Example: "I sometimes push my people too hard. I like to work with a sense of urgency and everyone is not always on that same wavelength."

Drawback: This strategy is better than admitting a flaw, but it's so widely used, it is transparent to any experienced interviewer.

BEST ANSWER: (and another reason it's so important to get a thorough description of your interviewer's needs *before* you answer questions): Assure the interviewer that you can think of nothing that would stand in the way of your performing in this position with excellence. Then, quickly review your strongest qualifications.

Example: "Nobody's perfect, but based on what you've told me about this position, I believe I'd make an outstanding match. I know that when I hire people, I look for two things most of all. Do they have the *qualifications* to do the job well, and the *motivation* to do it well?"

Everything in my background shows I have both the qualifications and a strong desire to achieve excellence in whatever I take on. So I can say in all honesty that I see nothing that would cause you even a small concern about my ability or my strong desire to perform this job with excellence."

Alternate strategy (if you don't yet know enough about the position to talk about such a perfect fit):

Instead of confessing a weakness, describe what you like most and like least, making sure that what you like most matches up with the most important qualification for success in the position, and what you like least is not essential.

Example: Let's say you're applying for a sales position:

"If given a choice, I like to spend as much time as possible in front of prospects *selling*, as opposed to shuffling paperwork back at the office. Of course, I long ago learned the importance of filing paperwork properly and I do it conscientiously. But what I really love to do is sell." (If your interviewer were a sales manager, this would be music to his ears.)

Q. #4 Tell me about something you did - or failed to do - that you now feel a little ashamed of.

TRAPS: There are some questions your interviewer has no business asking, and this is one. But while you may feel like answering, "none of your business", naturally you can't. Some interviewers ask this question on the chance *you* may admit to something, but if not, at least they'll see how *you* think on your feet.

Some unprepared candidates, flustered by this question, unburden themselves of guilt from their personal life or career, perhaps expressing regrets regarding a parent, spouse, child, etc. All such answers can be disastrous.

BEST ANSWER: As with faults and weaknesses, never confess a regret. But don't seem as if you're stonewalling either.

Best strategy: Say you harbor no regrets, then add a principle or habit you practice regularly for health human relations.

Example: Pause for reflection, as if the question never occurred to you. Then say, "You know, I really can't think of anything". (Pause again, then add): "I would add that as a general management principle, I've found that the best way to avoid regrets is to avoid causing them in the first place. I practice one habit that helps me a great deal in this regard. At the end of each day, I mentally review the day's events and conversations to take a second look at the people and developments I'm involved with and do a double-check of what they're likely to be feeling. Sometimes I'll see things that do need more follow-up, whether a pat on the back, or maybe a five minute chat in someone's office to make sure we're clear on things.

"I also like to make each person feel like a member of an elite team, like the Boston Celtics or LA Lakers in their prime. I've found that if you let each team member know you expect excellence in their performance...if you work hard to set an example yourself. ..and if you let people know you appreciate and respect their feelings, you wind up with a highly motivated group, a team that's actually having fun at work because they're striving for excellence rather than brooding over slights or regrets."

Q. #5 Why are you leaving (or did you leave) this position?

TRAPS: Never badmouth your previous industry, company, Board, boss, staff, employees or customers. This rule is inviolable: *never be negative*. Any mud you hurl will only soil your own suit.

Especially avoid words like "personality clash", "didn't get along", or others which cast a shadow on your competence, integrity or temperament.

BEST ANSWER:

(If you have a job presently:)

If you're not yet 100% committed to leaving your present post, don't be afraid to say so. Since you have a job, you are in a stronger position than someone who does not. But don't be coy, either. State honestly what you'd be hoping to find in a new spot. Of course, as stated often before, your answer will be all the stronger if you have already uncovered what this position is all about and you match your desires to it.

(If you do not presently have a job:)

Never lie about having been fired. It's unethical...and too easily checked. But do try to deflect the reason from you personally. If your firing was the result of a takeover, merger, division-wide layoff, etc., so much the better.

But you should also do something totally unnatural that will demonstrate consummate professionalism. Even if it hurts, describe your own firing - candidly, succinctly and without a trace of bitterness - from the company's point-of-view, indicating that you could understand why it happened and *you* might have made the same decision yourself.

Your stature will rise immensely and, most important of all, you will show you are healed from the wounds inflicted by the firing. You will enhance your image as first-class management material and stand head and shoulders above the legions of firing victims who, at the slightest provocation, rip open their shirts to expose their battle scars and decry the unfairness of it all.

For all prior positions:

Make sure you've prepared a brief reason for leaving. *Best reasons:* more money, opportunity, responsibility or growth.

Q. #6 The "Silent Treatment"

TRAPS: *Beware* - if you are unprepared for this question, you will probably not handle it right and possibly blow the interview. Thank goodness most interviewers don't employ it. It's normally used by those determined to see how you respond under stress. Here's how it works:

You answer an interviewer's question and then, instead of asking another, he just stares at you in a deafening silence.

You wait, growing a bit uneasy, and there he sits, silent as Mt. Rushmore, as if he doesn't believe what you've just said, or perhaps making you feel that you've unwittingly violated some cardinal rule of interview etiquette.

When you get this silent treatment after answering a particularly difficult question, such as "tell me about your weaknesses", its intimidating effect can be most disquieting, even to polished job hunters.

Most unprepared candidates rush in to fill the void of silence, viewing prolonged, uncomfortable silence as an invitation to clear up the previous answer which has obviously caused some problem. And that's what they do -- ramble on, sputtering more and more information, sometimes irrelevant and often damaging, because they are suddenly playing the role of someone who's goofed and is now trying to recoup. But since the candidate doesn't know where or how he goofed, he just keeps talking, showing how flustered and confused he is by the interviewer's unmovable silence.

BEST ANSWER: Like a primitive tribal mask, the Silent Treatment loses all its power to frighten you once you refuse to be intimidated. If your interviewer pulls it, keep quiet yourself for a while and then ask, with sincere politeness and not a trace of sarcasm, "*Is there anything else I can fill in on that point?*" That's all there is to it.

Whatever you do, don't let the Silent Treatment intimidate you into talking a blue streak, because you could easily talk yourself out of the position.

Q. #7 Why should I hire you?

TRAPS: Believe it or not, this is a killer question because so many candidates are unprepared for it. If you stammer or ad lib, you've blown it.

BEST ANSWER: By now you can see how critical it is to apply the overall strategy of uncovering the employer's needs before you answer questions. If you know the employer's greatest needs and desires, this question will give you a big leg up over other candidates

because you will give him better reasons for hiring you than anyone else is likely to...reasons tied directly to his own needs.

Whether your interviewer asks you this question *explicitly* or not, this is the most important question of your interview because he *must* answer this question favorably in his own mind before you will be hired. *So help him out!* Walk through each of the position's requirements as you understand them, and follow each with a reason why you meet that requirement so well.

Example: "As I understand your needs, you are first and foremost looking for someone who can manage the sales and marketing of your book publishing division. As you've said, you need someone with a strong background in trade book sales. This is where I've spent almost my entire career, so I've chalked up 18 years experience exactly in this area. I believe that I know the right contacts, methods, principles, and successful management techniques as well as any person can in our industry.

"You also need someone who can expand your book distribution channels. In my prior post, my innovative promotional ideas doubled, and then tripled, the number of outlets selling our books. I'm confident I can do the same for you.

"You need someone to give a new shot in the arm to your mail order sales, someone who knows how to sell in space and direct mail media. Here, too, I believe I have exactly the experience you need. In the last five years, I've increased our mail order book sales from \$600,000 to \$2,800,000, and now we're the country's second leading marketer of scientific and medical books by mail." *Etc., etc., etc.*

Every one of these selling "couplets" (his need matched by your qualifications) is a touchdown that runs up your score. It is your best opportunity to outsell your competition.

Q. #8 Aren't you overqualified for this position?

TRAPS: The employer may be concerned that you'll grow dissatisfied and leave.

BEST ANSWER: As with any objection, don't view this as a sign of imminent defeat. It's an invitation to teach the interviewer a new way to think about this situation, seeing advantages instead of drawbacks.

Example: "I recognize the job market for what it is - a marketplace. Like any marketplace, it's subject to the laws of supply and demand. So 'overqualified' can be a relative term, depending on how tight the job market is. And right now, it's very tight. I understand and accept that.

"Because of my unusually strong experience in (), I could start to contribute right away, perhaps much faster than someone who'd have to be brought along more slowly.

"There's also the value of all the training and years of experience that other companies have invested tens of thousands of dollars to give me. You'd be getting all the value of that without having to pay an extra dime for it. With someone who has yet to acquire that experience, he'd have to gain it on *your* nickel.

"I could also help you in many things they don't teach at the Harvard Business School. For example...how to hire, train, motivate, etc. When it comes to knowing how to work well with people and getting the most out of them, there's just no substitute for what you learn over many years of front-line experience. Your company would gain all this, too.

"From my side, there are strong benefits, as well. Right now, I'm unemployed. I want to work, very *much*, and the position you have here is exactly what I love to do and am best at. I'll be happy doing this work and that's what matters most to me, a lot more than money or title.

"Most important, I'm looking to make a long-term commitment in my career now. I've had enough of job hunting and want permanent spot at this point in my career. I also know that if I perform this job with excellence, other opportunities cannot help but open up for me right here. I'll find many other ways to help this company and in so doing, help myself. I really am looking to make a long-term commitment."

NOTE: The main concern behind the "overqualified" question is that you will leave your new employer as soon as something better comes your way. Anything you can say to demonstrate the sincerity of your commitment to the employer and reassure him that you're looking to stay for the long-term will help you overcome this objection.

Q. #9 Where do you see yourself five years from now?

TRAPS: One reason interviewers ask this question is to see if you're settling for this position, using it merely as a stopover until something better comes along. Or they could be trying to gauge your level of ambition.

If you're too specific, i.e., naming the promotions you someday hope to win, you'll sound presumptuous. If you're too vague, you'll seem rudderless.

BEST ANSWER: Reassure your interviewer that you're looking to make a long-term commitment...that this position entails exactly what you're looking to do and what you do extremely well. As for your future, you believe that if you perform each job at hand with excellence, future opportunities will take care of themselves.

Example: "I am definitely interested in making a long-term commitment to my next position. Judging by what you've told me about this position, it's exactly what I'm looking for and what I am very well qualified to do. In terms of my future career path, I'm confident that if I do my work with excellence, opportunities will inevitably open up for me. It's always been that way in my career, and I'm confident I'll have similar opportunities here."

Q. #10 Describe your ideal company, location and job.

TRAPS: This is often asked by an experienced interviewer who thinks you may be overqualified, but knows better than to show his hand by posing his objection directly. So he'll use this question instead, which often gets a candidate to reveal that, indeed, he or she is looking for something other than the position at hand.

BEST ANSWER: The only right answer is to describe what this company is offering, being sure to make your answer believable with specific reasons, stated with sincerity, why each quality represented by this opportunity is attractive to you.

Remember that if you're coming from a company that's the leader in its field or from a glamorous or much admired company, industry, city or position, your interviewer and his company may well have an "Avis" complex. That is, they may feel a bit defensive about being "second best" to the place you're coming from, worried that you may consider them bush league.

This anxiety could well be there even though you've done nothing to inspire it. You must go out of your way to assuage such anxiety, even if it's not expressed, by putting *their* virtues high on the list of exactly what you're looking for, providing credible reasons for wanting these qualities.

If you do not express genuine enthusiasm for the firm, its culture, location, industry, etc., you may fail to answer this "Avis" complex objection and, as a result, leave the interviewer suspecting that a hot shot like you, coming from a Fortune 500 company in New York, just wouldn't be happy at an unknown manufacturer based in Topeka, Kansas.

Q. #11 Why do you want to work at our company?

TRAPS: This question tests whether you've done any homework about the firm. If you haven't, you lose. If you have, you win bit.

BEST ANSWER: This question is your opportunity to hit the ball out of the park, thanks to the in-depth research you should do before any interview.

Best sources for researching your target company: annual reports, the corporate newsletter, contacts you know at the company or its suppliers, advertisements, articles about the company in the trade press.

Q. #12 What are your career options right now?

TRAPS: The interviewer is trying to find out, "*How desperate are you?*"

BEST ANSWER: Prepare for this question by thinking of how you can position yourself as a desired commodity. If you are still working, describe the possibilities at your present firm and why, though you're greatly appreciated there, you're looking for something more (challenge, money, responsibility, etc.). Also mention that you're seriously exploring opportunities with one or two other firms.

If you're no longer working, you can talk about other employment possibilities you're actively exploring. But do this with a light touch, speaking only in general terms. You don't want to seem manipulative or coy.

Q. #13 Why have you been out of work so long?

TRAPS: A tough question if you've been on the beach a long time. *You* don't want to seem like damaged goods.

BEST ANSWER: You want to emphasize factors, which have prolonged your job search by your own choice.

Example: "After my job was terminated, I made a conscious decision not to jump on the first opportunities to come along. In my life, I've *found* that you can always turn a negative into a positive IF you try hard enough. This is what I determined to do. I decided to take whatever time I needed to think through what I do best, what I most want to do, where I'd like to do it...and then identify those companies that could offer such an opportunity.

"Also, in all honesty, you have to factor in the recession (consolidation, stabilization, etc.) in the (banking, financial services, manufacturing, advertising, etc.) industry.

"So between my being selective and the companies in our industry downsizing, the process has taken time. But in the end, I'm convinced that when I do *find* the right match, all that careful evaluation from both sides of the desk will have been well worthwhile *for* both the company that hires me and me."

Q. #14 Tell me honestly about the strong points and weak points of your boss (company, management team, etc.)...

TRAPS: Skillful interviewers sometimes make it almost irresistible to open up and air a little dirty laundry *from* your previous position. *DON'T*.

BEST ANSWER: Remember the rule: never be negative. Stress only the good points, no matter how charmingly you're invited to be critical.

Your interviewer doesn't care a whit about your previous boss. He wants to *find* out how loyal and positive you are, and whether you'll criticize him behind his back if pressed to do so by someone in his own company. This question is your opportunity to demonstrate your loyalty to those you work with.

Q. #15 What good books have you read lately?

TRAPS: As in all matters of your interview, never fake familiarity you don't have. Yet you don't want to seem like a dullard who hasn't read a book since *Tom Sawyer*.

BEST ANSWER: Unless you're up for a position in academia or as a book critic for *The New York Times*, you're not expected to be a literary lion. But it wouldn't hurt to have read a handful of the most recent and influential books in your profession and on management. Consider it as part of the work of your job search to read up on a few of these leading books. But make sure they are *quality* books that reflect favorably upon you, nothing that could even remotely be considered superficial. Finally, add a recently published best selling work of fiction by a world class author and you'll pass this question with flying colors.

Q. #16 Tell me about a situation when your work was criticized.

TRAPS: This is tough question because it's a more clever and subtle way to get you to admit a weakness. You can't dodge it by pretending you've never been criticized. Everybody has been. Yet it can be quite damaging to start admitting potential faults and failures that you'd just as soon leave buried.

This question is also intended to probe how well you accept criticism and direction.

BEST ANSWER: Begin by emphasizing the extremely positive feedback you've gotten throughout your career and (if it's true) that your performance reviews have been uniformly, excellent.

Of course, no one is perfect and you always welcome suggestions on how to improve your performance. Then, give an example of a not-too-damaging learning experience from *early* in your career and relate the ways this lesson has since helped you. This demonstrates that you learned from the experience and the lesson is now one of the strongest breastplates in your suit of armor.

If you are pressed for a criticism from a recent position, choose something fairly trivial that in no way is essential to your successful performance. Add that you've learned from this, too, and over the past several years/months, it's no longer an area of concern because you now make it a regular practice to...etc.

Another way to answer this question would be to describe your intention to broaden your mastery of an area of growing importance in your field. For example, this might be a computer program you've been meaning to sit down and learn...a new management technique you've read about or perhaps attending a seminar on some cutting edge branch of your profession.

Again, the key is to focus on something *not essential* to your brilliant performance but which adds yet another dimension to your already impressive knowledge base.

Q. #17 What are your outside interests?

TRAPS: You want to be well rounded, not a drone. But your potential employer would be even more turned off if he suspects that your heavy extracurricular load will interfere with your commitment to your work duties.

BEST ANSWER: Try to gauge how this company's culture would look upon your favorite outside activities and be guided accordingly.

You can also use this question to shatter any stereotypes that could limit your chances. If you're over 50, for example, describe your activities that demonstrate physical stamina. If you're young, mention an activity that connotes wisdom and institutional trust, such as serving on the board of a popular local charity.

But above all, remember that your employer is hiring you for what you can do *for him*, not your family, yourself or outside organizations, no matter how admirable those activities may be.

Q. #18 The "Fatal Flaw" question.

TRAPS: If an interviewer has read your resume carefully, he may try to zero in on a "fatal flaw" of your candidacy, perhaps that you don't have a college degree...you've been out of the job market for some time...you never earned your CPA, etc.

A fatal flaw question can be deadly, but usually only if you respond by being overly defensive.

BEST ANSWER: As every master salesperson knows, you will encounter objections (whether stated or merely thought) in every sale. They're part and parcel of the buyer's anxiety. The key is to not *exacerbate* the buyer's anxiety, but *diminish* it. Here's how whenever you come up against a fatal flaw question:

1. Be completely honest, open and straight forward about admitting the shortcoming. (Showing you have nothing to hide diminishes the buyer's anxiety.)
2. Do not apologize or try to explain it away. You know that this supposed flaw is nothing to be concerned about, and this is the attitude you want your interviewer to adopt as well.
3. Add that as desirable as such a qualification might be, its lack has made you work all the harder throughout your career and has not prevented you from compiling an outstanding track record of achievements. You might even give examples of how, through a relentless commitment to excellence, you have consistently outperformed those who do have this qualification.

Of course, the ultimate way to handle "fatal flaw" questions is to *prevent them from arising in the first place*. You will do that by following the master strategy described in Question #1, *i.e., uncovering the employer's needs and then matching your qualifications to those needs*.

Once you've gotten the employer to start talking about *his* most urgently-felt wants and goals for the position, and then helped him see in step-by-step fashion how perfectly your background and achievements match up with those needs, you're going to have one very enthusiastic interviewer on your hands, one who is no longer looking for "fatal flaws".

Q. #19 How do you feel about reporting to a younger person (woman, minority, etc.)?

TRAPS: It's a shame that some interviewers feel the need to ask this question, but many understand the reality that prejudices still exist among some job candidates, and it's better to try to flush them out beforehand.

The trap here is that in today's politically sensitized environment, even a *well-intentioned* answer can result in planting your foot neatly into your mouth. Avoid anything, which smacks of a patronizing or an insensitive attitude, such as "*I think they can make terrific bosses*" or "*Hey, some of my best friends are...*"

Of course, since almost anyone with an IQ above room temperature will at least try to steadfastly affirm the right answer here, your interviewer will be judging your sincerity most of all. "*Do you really feel that way?*" is what he or she will be wondering.

So you must make your answer believable and not just an automatic. If the firm is wise enough to have promoted people on the basis of ability alone, they're likely quite proud of it, and prefer to hire others who will wholeheartedly share their strong sense of fair play.

BEST ANSWER: You greatly admire a company that hires and promotes on merit alone and you couldn't agree more with that philosophy. The age (gender, race, etc.) of the person you report to would certainly make no difference to you.

Whoever has that position has obviously earned it and knows their job well. Both the person and the position are fully deserving of respect. You believe that all people in a company, from the receptionist to the chairman, work best when their abilities, efforts and feelings are respected and rewarded fairly, and that includes you. That's the best type of work environment you can hope to find.

Q. #20 On confidential matters.

TRAPS: When an interviewer presses you to reveal confidential information about a present or former employer, you may feel it's a no-win situation. If you cooperate, you could be judged untrustworthy. If you don't, you may irritate the interviewer and seem obstinate, uncooperative or overly suspicious.

BEST ANSWER: Your interviewer may press you for his information for two reasons.

First, many companies use interviews to research the competition. It's a perfect set up. Here, in their own lair, is an insider from the enemy camp who can reveal prized information on the competition's plans, research, financial condition, etc.

Second, the company may be testing your integrity to see if you can be cajoled or bullied into revealing confidential data.

What to do? The answer here is easy. *Never* reveal anything truly confidential about a present or former employer. By all means, explain your reticence *diplomatically*. For example, "I certainly want to be as open as I can about that. But I also wish to respect the rights of those who have trusted me with their most sensitive information, just as you would hope to be able to trust any of your key people when talking with a competitor."

And certainly you can allude to your finest achievements in specific ways that don't reveal the combination to the company safe.

But be guided by the golden rule. If you were the owner of your present company, would you feel it ethically wrong for the information to be given to *your* competitors? If so, steadfastly refuse to reveal it.

Remember that this question pits your desire to be cooperative against your integrity. Faced with any such choice, *always choose integrity*. It is a far more valuable commodity than whatever information the company may pry from you. Moreover, once you surrender the information, your stock goes down. They will surely lose respect for you.

One President we know always presses candidates unmercifully for confidential information. If he doesn't get it, he grows visibly annoyed, relentlessly inquisitive. It's all an act: He couldn't care less about the information. This is his way of testing the candidate's moral fiber. Only those who hold fast are hired.

Q. #21 Would you lie for the company?

TRAPS: This is another question that pits two values against one another, in this case loyalty against integrity.

BEST ANSWER: Try to avoid choosing between two values, giving a positive statement which covers all bases instead.

Example: "I would never do anything to hurt the company."

If aggressively pressed to choose between two competing values, *always choose personal integrity*. It is the most prized of all values.

Q. #22 Looking back, what would you do differently in your life?

TRAPS: this question is usually asked to uncover any life-influencing mistakes, regrets, disappointments or problems that may continue to affect your personality and performance. You do not want to give the interviewer anything negative to remember you by, such as some great personal or career disappointment, even long ago, that you wish you could have avoided.

Nor do you wish to give any answer which may hint that your whole heart and soul will not be in your work.

BEST ANSWER: Indicate that you are a happy, fulfilled, optimistic person and that, in general, you wouldn't change a thing.

Example: "It's been a good life, rich in learning and experience, and the best is yet to come. Every experience in life is a lesson in its own way. I wouldn't change a thing."

Q. #23 Could you have done a better in you're last job?

TRAPS: This is no time for true confessions of major or even minor problems.

BEST ANSWER: Again, never be negative.

Example: "I suppose with the benefit of hindsight you can always find things to do better, of course, but off the top of my head, I can't think of anything of major consequence."

(If more explanation seems necessary...)

Describe a situation that didn't suffer because of you, but from external conditions beyond your control.

For example, describe the disappointment you felt with a test campaign, new product launch, merger, etc., which looked promising at first, but led to underwhelming results. "I wish we could have known at the start what we later found out (about the economy turning, the

marketplace changing, etc.), but since we couldn't, we just had to go for it. And we did learn from it..."

Q. #24 Can you work under pressure?

TRAPS: An easy question, but *you* want to make your answer believable.

BEST ANSWER: Absolutely... (then prove it with a vivid example or two of a goal or project accomplished under severe pressure).

Q. #25 What makes you angry?

TRAPS: You don't want to come across either as a hothead or a wimp.

BEST ANSWER: Give an answer that's suited to both your personality and the management style of the firm. Here, the homework you've done about the company and its style can help in your choice of words.

Examples:

If you are a reserved person and/or the corporate culture is coolly professional:

"I'm an even-tempered and positive person by nature, and I believe this helps me a great deal in keeping my department running smoothly, harmoniously and with a genuine esprit de corps. I believe in communicating clearly what's expected, getting people's commitment to those goals, and then following up continuously to check progress.

"If anyone or anything is going off track, I want to know about it early. If after that kind of open communication and follow up, someone isn't getting the job done, I'll want to know why. If there's no good reason, then I'll get impatient and angry...and take appropriate steps from there. But if you hire good people, motivate them to strive for excellence and then follow-up constantly, it almost never gets to that stage."

If you are feisty by nature and/or the position calls for a tough strawboss:

"You know what makes me angry? People who (then fill in the blanks with the most objectionable traits for this type of position) ...people who don't pull their own weight, who are negative, people who lie...etc."

Q. #26 Why aren't you earning more money at this stage of your career?

TRAPS: You don't want to give the impression that money is not important to you, yet you want to explain why your salary may be a little below industry standards.

BEST ANSWER: You like to make money, but other factors are even more important.

Example:

"Making money is very important to me, and one reason I'm here is because I'm looking to make more. Throughout my career, what's been even more important to me is doing work I really like to do at the kind of company I like and respect." (Then be prepared to be specific about what your ideal position and company would be like, matching them as closely as possible to the opportunity at hand.) "

Q. #27 Who has inspired you in your life and why?

TRAPS: The two traps here are unpreparedness and irrelevance. If you grope for an answer, it seems you've never been inspired. If you ramble about your high school basketball coach, you've wasted an opportunity to present qualities of great value to the company.

BEST ANSWER: Have a few heroes in mind, from your mental "Board of Directors" - leaders in your industry, from history or anyone else who has been your mentor.

Be prepared to give examples of how their words, actions or teachings have helped inspire your achievements. As always, prepare an answer which highlights qualities that would be highly valuable in the position you are seeking.

Q. #28 What was the toughest decision you ever had to make?

TRAPS: Giving an unprepared or irrelevant answer.

BEST ANSWER: Be prepared with a good example, explaining why the decision was difficult...the process you followed in reaching it...the courageous or effective way you carried it out...and the beneficial results.

Q. #29 Tell me about the most boring job you've ever had.

TRAPS: You give a very memorable description of a very boring job. Result? You become associated with this boring job in the interviewer's mind.

BEST ANSWER: You have never allowed yourself to grow bored with a job and you can't understand it when others let themselves fall into that rut.

Example: "Perhaps I've been fortunate, but I've never found myself bored with any job I've ever held. I've always enjoyed hard work. As with actors who feel there are no small parts, I also believe that in every company or department there are exciting challenges and intriguing problems crying out for energetic and enthusiastic solutions. If you're bored, it's probably because you're not challenging yourself to tackle those problems right under your nose."

Q. #30 Have you been absent from work more than a few days in any previous position?

TRAPS: If you've had a problem, you can't lie. You could easily be found out. Yet admitting an attendance problem could raise many red flags.

BEST ANSWER: If you have had *no* problem, emphasize your excellent and consistent attendance record throughout your career.

Also describe how important you believe such consistent attendance is for a key executive...why it's up to you to set an example of dedication and why there's just not substitute for being there with your people to keep the operation running smoothly, answer questions and handle problems and crises as they arise.

If you do have a past attendance problem, you want to minimize it, making it clear that it was an exceptional circumstance and that its cause has been corrected.

To do this, give the same answer as above, but preface it with something like, "Other than being out last year (or whenever) because of (your reason, which is now in the past), I have never had a problem and have enjoyed an excellent attendance record throughout my career. Furthermore, I believe consistent attendance is important because..." (pick up the rest of the answer as outlined above).

Q. #31 What changes would you make if you came on board?

TRAPS: Watch out! This question can derail your candidacy faster than a bomb under the tracks - and *just as you're about to be hired*.

Reason: No matter how bright *you* are, you cannot know the right actions to take in a position before you settle in and get to know the operation's strengths, weaknesses, key people, financial condition, methods of operation, etc. If you lunge at this temptingly baited question, you will probably be seen as someone who shoots from the hip.

Moreover, no matter how comfortable you may feel with your interviewer, you are still an *outsider*. No one, including your interviewer, likes to think that a know-it-all outsider is going to come in, turn the place upside down and with sweeping, grand gestures, promptly demonstrate what jerks everybody's been for years.

BEST ANSWER: You, of course, will want to take a good, hard look at everything the company is doing before making any recommendations.

Example: "Well, I wouldn't be a very good doctor if I gave my diagnosis before the examination. Should you hire me, as I hope you will, I'd want to take a good hard look at everything you're doing and understand why it's being done that way. I'd like to have in-depth

meetings with you and the other key people to get a deeper grasp of what *you* feel you're doing right and what could be improved.

"From what you've told me so far, the areas of greatest concern to you are..." (Name them. Then do two things. First, ask if these are in fact his major concerns. If so, then reaffirm how your experience in meeting similar needs elsewhere might prove very helpful).

Q. #32 I'm concerned that you don't have as much experience as we'd like in...

TRAPS: This could be a make-or-break question. The interviewer *mostly* likes what he sees, but has doubts over one key area. If you can assure him on this point, the job may be yours.

BEST ANSWER: This question is related to "The Fatal Flaw" (Question #18), but here the concern is not that you are *totally missing* some qualification, such as a CPA certification, but rather that your experience is *light* in one area.

Before going into any interview, try to identify the weakest aspects of your candidacy from this company's point of view. Then prepare the best answer you possibly can to shore up your defenses.

To get you past this question with flying colors, you are going to rely on your master strategy of *uncovering the employer's greatest wants and needs and then matching them with your strengths*. Since you already know how to do this from Question #1, you are in a much stronger position.

More specifically, when the interviewer poses an objection like this, you should...

- 1) Agree on the importance of this qualification.
- 2) Explain that your strength here may indeed be greater than your resume indicates because...
- 3) When this strength is added to your other strengths, it's really your *combination* of qualifications that's most important.

Then review the areas of your greatest strengths that match up most favorably with the company's most urgently felt wants and needs. This is a very powerful way to handle this question for two reasons. First, you're giving your interviewer more ammunition in the area of his concern. But more important, you're shifting his focus *away* from this one, isolated area and putting it on the *unique combination* of strengths you offer, strengths which tie in perfectly with his greatest wants.

Q. #33 How do you feel about working nights and weekends?

TRAPS: Blurt out "no way, Jose" and you can kiss the job offer goodbye. But what if you have a family and want to work a reasonably normal schedule? Is there a way to get both the job *and* the schedule you want?

BEST ANSWER: First, if you're a confirmed workaholic, this question is a softball lob. Whack it out of the park on the first swing by saying this kind of schedule is just your style. Add that your family understands it. Indeed, they're happy for you, as they know you get your greatest satisfaction from your work.

If, however, you prefer a more balanced lifestyle, answer this question with another: "*What's the norm for your best people here?*"

If the hours still sound unrealistic for you, ask, "*Do you have any top people who perform exceptionally for you, but who also have families and like to get home in time to see them at night?*" Chances are the company does, and this associates you with this other, "top-performers-who-leave-no-later-than-six" group.

Depending on the answer, be honest about how you would fit into the picture. If all those extra hours make you uncomfortable, say so, but phrase your response positively.

Example: "I love my work and do it exceptionally well. I think the results speak for themselves, especially in... (mention your two or three qualifications of greatest interest to the employer. Remember, this is what he wants most, not a workaholic with *weak*

credentials.) Not only would I bring these qualities, but I've built my whole career on working not just here, but *smart*. I think you'll find me one of the most *productive* people here. I *do* have a family who likes to see me after work and on weekends. They add balance and richness to my life, which in turn helps me be happy and productive at work. If I could handle some of that extra work at home in the evenings or on weekends, that would be ideal. You'd be getting a person of exceptional productivity who meets your needs with very strong credentials. And I'd be able to handle some of the heavy workload at home where I can be under the same roof as my family. Everybody would win."

Q. #34 Are you willing to relocate or travel?

TRAPS: Answer with a flat "no" and you may slam the door shut on this opportunity. But what if you'd really prefer not to relocate or travel, yet wouldn't want to lose the job offer over it?

BEST ANSWER: First, find out where you may have to relocate and how much travel may be involved. Then respond to the question.

If there's no problem, say so enthusiastically.

If you do have a reservation, there are two schools of thought on how to handle it.

One advises you to keep your options open and your reservations to yourself in the early going, by saying, "no problem". Your strategy here is to get the best offer you can, *then* make a judgment whether it's worth it to you to relocate or travel.

Also, by the time the offer comes through, you may have other offers and can make a more informed decision. Why kill off this opportunity before it has a chance to blossom into something really special? And if you're a little more desperate three months from now, you might wish you hadn't slammed the door on relocating or traveling.

The second way to handle this question is to voice a reservation, but assert that you'd be open to relocating (or traveling) for the right opportunity.

If the company really wants you, saying this can induce them to sweeten the pot or hire you in a capacity which doesn't entail relocation or travel.

The answering strategy you choose depends on how eager you are for the job. If you want to take no chances, choose the first approach.

If you want to play a little harder-to-get in hopes of generating a more enticing offer, choose the second.

Q. #35 Do you have the stomach to fire people? Have you had experience in firing many people?

TRAPS: This "innocent" question could be a trap door which sends you down a chute and lands you in a heap of dust outside the front door. Why? Because its real intent is not just to see if you've got the stomach to fire, but also to uncover *poor judgment in hiring* which has caused you to fire so many. Also, if you fire so often, you could be a tyrant.

So don't rise to the bait by boasting how many you've fired, unless you're prepared to explain why it was beyond your control, and not the result of your poor hiring procedures or foul temperament.

BEST ANSWER: Describe the rational and sensible management process you follow in both hiring and firing.

Example: "My whole management approach is to hire the best people I can find, train them thoroughly and well, get them excited and proud to be part of our team, and then work with them to achieve our goals together. If you do all of that right, especially hiring the right people, I've found you don't have to fire very often.

"So with me, firing is a last resort. But when it's got to be done, it's got to be done, and the faster and cleaner the better. A poor employee can wreak terrible damage in undermining the morale of an entire team of good people. When there's no other way, I've found it's better for all concerned to act decisively in getting rid of offenders who "won't change their ways."

Q. #36 Why have you had so many jobs?

TRAPS: Your interviewer fears you may leave this position quickly, as you have others. He's concerned you may be unstable, or a "problem person" who can't get along with others.

BEST ANSWER: First, before you even get to the interview stage, you should try to minimize your image as a job hopper. If there are several entries on your resume of less than one year, consider eliminating the less important ones. Perhaps you can specify the time you spent at previous positions in rounded years, not in months and years. *Example:* Instead of showing three positions this way:

1/1982 - 3/1983, Position A;
 1/1983 - 12/1983, Position B;
 1/1984 - 8/1987, Position C;

...it would be better to show simply:

1982 - 1983, Position A;
 1984 - 1987, Position C.

In other words, you would drop Position B altogether. Notice what a difference this makes in reducing your image as a job hopper.

Once in front of the interviewer and this question comes up, you must try to reassure him.

Describe each position as part of an overall pattern of growth and career destination.

Be careful not to blame other people for your frequent changes. But you can and should attribute certain changes to conditions beyond your control. *Example:* Thanks to an upcoming merger, you wanted to avoid an ensuing bloodbath, so you made a good, upward career move before your department came under the axe of the new owners.

If possible, also show that your job changes were more frequent in your younger days, while you were establishing yourself, rounding out your skills and looking for the right career path. At this stage in your career, you're certainly much more interested in the best *long-term* opportunity.

You might also cite the job(s) where you stayed the longest and describe that this type of situation is what you're looking for now.

Q. #37 What do you see as the proper role/mission of...

... a good (job title you're seeking);

... a good manager;

... an executive in serving the community;

... a leading company in our industry; etc.

TRAPS: these and other "proper role" questions are designed to test your understanding of your place in the bigger picture of your department, company, community and profession...as well as the proper role each of these entities should play in *its* bigger picture.

The question is most frequently asked by the most *thoughtful* individuals and companies...or by those concerned that you're coming from a place with a radically different corporate culture (such as from a big government bureaucracy to an aggressive small company).

The most frequent mistake executives make in answering is simply not being prepared (seeming as if they've never given any of this a thought)...or in phrasing an answer best suited to their *prior* organization's culture instead of the hiring company's.

BEST ANSWER: Think of the most essential of ingredients of success for each category above - your job title, your role as manager, your firm's role, etc.

Identify at least three but no more than six qualities you feel are most important to success in each role. Then commit your responses to memory.

Here, again, the more information you've already drawn out about the greatest wants and needs of the interviewer of the firm, the more on-target your answer will be.

Q. #38 What would you say to your boss if he's crazy about an idea, but you think it stinks?

TRAPS: This is another question that pits two values, in this case loyalty and honesty, against one another.

BEST ANSWER: Remember the rule stated earlier: in any conflict between values, *always choose integrity*.

Example: "I believe that when evaluating anything, it's important to emphasize the positive." What do I like about this idea?

"Then, if I have reservations, I certainly want to point them out, as specifically, objectively and factually as I can.

"After all, the most important thing I owe my boss is *honesty*. If he can't count on me for that, then everything else I may do or say could be questionable in his eyes.

"But I also want to express my thoughts in a constructive way. So my goal in this case would be to see if my boss and I could make his idea even stronger and more appealing, so that if effectively overcomes any initial reservation I or others may have about it.

"Of course, if he overrules me and says, '*no, let's do it my way,*' then I owe him my full and enthusiastic support to make it work as best it can."

Q. #39 How could you have improved your career progress?

TRAPS: This is another variation on the question, "If you could, how would you live your life over?" Remember, you're not going to fall for any such invitations to rewrite your personal history. You can't win if you do.

BEST ANSWER: You're generally quite happy with your career progress. Maybe, if you had know something earlier in life (impossible to know at the time, such as the booming growth in a branch of your industry... or the corporate downsizing that would phase out your last job), you might have moved in a certain direction sooner.

But all things considered, you take responsibility for where you are, how you've gotten there, where you're going and you harbor no regrets.

Q. #40 What would you do if a fellow executive on your own corporate level wasn't pulling his or her own weight and this was hurting your department?

TRAPS: This question and other hypothetical ones test your sense of human relations and how you might handle office politics.

BEST ANSWER: Try to gauge the political style of the firm and be guided accordingly. In general, fall back on universal principles of effective human relations – which in the end embody the way you would like to be treated in a similar situation.

Example: "Good human relations would call for me to go directly to the person and explain the situation, to try to enlist his help in a constructive, positive solution. If I sensed resistance, I would be as persuasive as I know how to explain the benefits we can all gain from working together, and the problems we, the company and our customers will experience if we don't."

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: And what do you do if he still didn't change his ways?

ANSWER: "One thing I wouldn't do is let the problem slide, because it would only get worse and overlooking it would set a bad precedent. I would try again and again and again, in whatever way I could, to solve the problem, involving wider and wider circles of people, both above and below the offending executive and including my own boss if necessary, so that everyone involved can see the rewards for teamwork and the drawbacks of non-cooperation.

"I might add that I've never yet come across a situation that couldn't be resolved by harnessing others in a determined, constructive effort."

Q. #41 You've been with your firm a long time. Won't it be hard switching to a new company?

TRAPS: Your interviewer is worried that this old dog will find it hard to learn new tricks.

BEST ANSWER: To overcome this objection, you must point to the many ways you have grown and adapted to changing conditions at your present firm. It has *not* been a static situation. Highlight the different responsibilities you've held, the wide array of new situations you've faced and conquered.

As a result, you've learned to adapt quickly to whatever is thrown at you, and you thrive on the stimulation of new challenges.

To further assure the interviewer, describe the similarities between the new position and your prior one. Explain that you should be quite comfortable working there, since their needs and your skills make a perfect match.

Q. #42 May I contact your present employer for a reference?

TRAPS: If you're trying to keep your job search private, this is the last thing you want. But if you don't cooperate, won't you seem as if you're trying to hide something?

BEST ANSWER: Express your concern that you'd keep your job search private, but that in time, it perfectly okay.

Example: "My present employer is not aware of my job search and, for obvious reasons, I'd prefer to keep it that way. I'd be most appreciative if we kept our discussions confidential right now. Of course, when we both agree the time is right, then by all means you should contact them. I'm very proud of my record there."

Q. #43 Give me an example of your creativity (analytical skill...managing ability, etc.).

TRAPS: The worst offense here is simply being unprepared. Your hesitation may seem as if you're having a hard time remembering the last time you were creative, analytical, etc.

BEST ANSWER: Remember from Question #2 that you should commit to memory a list of your greatest and most recent achievements, ever ready on the tip of your tongue. If you have such a list, it's easy to present any of your achievements in light of the quality the interviewer is asking about. For example, the smashing success you orchestrated at last year's trade show could be used as an example of creativity, or analytical ability, or your ability to manage.

Q. #44 Where could you use some improvement?

TRAPS: Another tricky way to get *you* to admit weaknesses. Don't fall for it.

BEST ANSWER: Keep this answer, like all your answers, positive. A good way to answer this question is to identify a cutting-edge branch of your profession (one that's not essential to your employer's needs) as an area you're very excited about and want to explore more fully over the next six months.

Q. #45 What do you worry about?

TRAPS: Admit to worrying, and you could sound like a loser. Saying you never worry doesn't sound credible.

BEST ANSWER: Redefine the word "worry" so that it doesn't reflect negatively on you.

Example: "I wouldn't call it worry, but I am a strongly goal-oriented person. So I keep turning over in my mind anything that seems to be keeping me from achieving those goals, until I find a solution. That's part of my tenacity, I suppose."

Q. #46 How many hours a week do you normally work?

TRAPS: You don't want to give a specific number. Make it too low, and you may not measure up. Too high, and you'll forever feel guilty about sneaking out the door at 5:15.

BEST ANSWER: *If you are in fact a workaholic and you sense this company would like that:* Say you are a confirmed workaholic, that you often work nights and weekends. Your family accepts this because it makes you fulfilled.

If you are not a workaholic: Say you have always worked hard and put in long hours. It goes with the territory. In one sense, it's hard to keep track of the hours because your work is a labor of love; you enjoy nothing more than solving problems. So you're almost *always* thinking about your work, including times when you're home, while shaving in the morning, while commuting, etc.

Q. #47 What's the most difficult part of being a (job title)?

TRAPS: Unless you phrase your answer properly, your interviewer may conclude that whatever you identify as "difficult" is where you're weak.

BEST ANSWER: First, redefine "difficult" to be "challenging", which is more positive. Then, identify an area *everyone* in your profession considers challenging and in which you excel. Describe the process you follow that enables you to get splendid results and be specific about those results.

Example: "I think every sales manager finds it challenging to motivate the troops in a recession. But that's probably the strongest test of a top sales manager. I feel this is one area where I excel.

"When I see the first sign that sales may slip or that sales force motivation is flagging because of a downturn in the economy, here's the plan I put into action immediately..." (followed by a description of each step in the process...and *most important*, the exceptional results you've achieved).

Q. #48 The "Hypothetical Problem"

TRAPS: Sometimes an interviewer will describe a difficult situation and ask, "*How would you handle this?*" Since it is virtually impossible to have all the facts in front of you from such a short presentation, don't fall into the trap of trying to solve this problem and giving your verdict on the spot. It will make your decision-making process seem woefully inadequate.

BEST ANSWER: Instead, describe the rational, methodical process you would follow in analyzing this problem, whom you would consult with, generating possible solutions, choosing the best course of action, and monitoring the results. Remember, *in all such*, "*What would you do?*" questions, always describe your *process* or *working methods*, and you'll never go far wrong.

Q. #49 What was the toughest challenge you've ever faced?

TRAPS: Being unprepared or citing an example from so early *in* your life that it doesn't score many points for you at this stage of your career.

BEST ANSWER: This is an easy question if you're prepared. Have a recent example ready that demonstrates either:

- 1) A quality most important to the job at hand; or,
- 2) A quality that is *always* in demand, such as leadership, initiative, managerial skill, persuasiveness, courage, persistence, intelligence, etc.

Q. #50 Have you considered starting your own business?

TRAPS: If you say "yes" and elaborate enthusiastically, you could be perceived as a loose cannon in a larger company, too entrepreneurial to make a good team player...or someone who had to settle for the corporate life because you couldn't make a go of your own business.

Also, too much enthusiasm in answering "yes" could rouse the paranoia of a small company, indicating that you may plan to go out on your own soon, perhaps taking some key accounts or trade secrets with you.

On the other hand, if you answer "no, never" you could be perceived as a security-minded drone who never dreamed a big dream.

BEST ANSWER: Again, it's best to:

- 1) Gauge this company's corporate culture before answering, and
- 2) Be honest (which doesn't mean you have to vividly share your fantasy of the franchise or bed-and-breakfast you someday plan to open).

In general, if the corporate culture is that of a large, formal, military-style structure, minimize any indication that you'd love to have your own business. You might say, "Oh, I may have given it a thought once or twice, but my whole career has been in larger organizations. That's where I've excelled and where I want to be".

If the corporate culture is closer to the free-wheeling, everybody's-a-deal-maker variety, then emphasize that in a firm like this, you can virtually get the best of all worlds, the excitement of seeing your own ideas and plans take shape...combined with the resources and stability of a well-established organization. Sounds like the perfect environment to you.

In any case, no matter what the corporate culture, be sure to indicate that any desires about running your own show are part of your *past*, not your present or future.

The last thing you want to project is an image of either the dreamer who failed and is now settling for the corporate cocoon...or the restless maverick that will fly out the door with key accounts, contacts and trade secrets under his arm just as soon as his bankroll has gotten rebuilt.

Always remember: Match what you want with what the position offers. The more information you've uncovered about the position, the more believable you can make your case.

Q. #51 What are your goals?

TRAPS: Not having any...or having only vague generalities, not highly specific goals.

BEST ANSWER: Many executives in a position to hire you are strong believers in goal-setting (it's one of the reasons they've achieved so much). They like to hire in kind.

If you're vague about your career and personal goals, it could be a big turnoff to many people you will encounter in your job search.

Be ready to discuss your goals for each major area of your life: career, personal development and learning, family, physical (health), community service and (if your interviewer is clearly a religious person) you could very briefly and generally allude to your spiritual goals (showing you are a well-balanced individual with your values in the right order).

Be prepared to describe each goal in terms of specific milestones you wish to accomplish along the way, time periods you're allotting for accomplishment, why the goal is important to you, and the specific steps you're taking to bring it about. But do this concisely, as you never want to talk for more than two minutes straight before letting your interviewer back into the conversation.

Q. #52 What do you look for when you hire people?

TRAPS: Being unprepared for the question.

BEST ANSWER: Speak your own thoughts here, but for the best answer, weave them around the three most important qualifications for *any* position:

- 1) *Can* the person do the work (qualifications)?
- 2) *Will* the person do the work (motivation)?
- 3) Will the person fit *in* ("our *kind* of team player")?

Q. #53 Sell me this stapler...(this pencil...this clock...or some other object on interviewer's desk).

TRAPS: Some interviewers, especially business owners and hard-charging executives in marketing-driven companies, feel that good salesmanship is *essential* for any key position and ask for an instant demonstration of your skill. Be ready.

BEST ANSWER: Of course, you already know the most important secret of all great salesmanship - *"find out what people want, then show them how to get it"*.

If your interviewer picks up his stapler and asks, *"sell this to me,"* you are going to demonstrate this proven master principle. *Here's how:*

"Well, a good salesman must know both his product and *his* prospect before he sells anything. If I were selling this, I'd first get to know everything I could about it, all its features and benefits.

"Then, if my goal were to sell it to you, I would do some research on how you might use a fine stapler like this. The best way to do that is by asking some questions. May I ask you a few questions?"

Then ask a few questions such as, "Just out of curiosity, if you didn't already have a stapler like this, why would you want one? And in addition to that? Any other reasons? Anything else?"

"And would you want such a stapler to be reliable? Hold a good supply of staples?" (Ask more questions that point to the features this stapler has.)

Once you've asked these questions, make your presentation, citing all the features and benefits of this stapler and why it's exactly what the interviewer just told you he's looking *for*. Then close with, "Just out of curiosity, what would you consider a reasonable price *for* a quality stapler like this...a stapler you could have *right* now and would (then repeat all the problems the stapler would solve *for* him)?" Whatever he says, (unless it's zero), say, "Okay, we've got a deal."

Note: If your interviewer tests you by *fighting* every step of the way, denying that he even wants such an item, *don't fight him*. Take the product away from him by saying, "Mr. Prospect, I'm delighted you've told me right upfront that there's no way you'd ever want this stapler. As you well know, the first rule of the most productive salespeople in any field is to meet the needs of people who really *need* and *want* our products, and it just wastes everyone's time if we try to force it on those who don't. And I certainly wouldn't want to waste your time. But we sell many items. Is there any product on this desk you would very much like to own...just one item?" When he points something out, repeat the process above. If he knows anything about selling, he may give you a standing ovation.

Q. #54 "The Salary Question" - How much money do you want?

TRAPS: May also be phrased as, *"What salary are you worth?"*. . . or, *"How much are you making now?"* This is your most important negotiation. Handle it wrong and you can blow the job offer or go to work at far less than you might have gotten.

BEST ANSWER: For maximum salary negotiating power, remember these five guidelines:

1. Never bring up salary. Let the interviewer do it first.

Good salespeople sell their products thoroughly before talking price. So *should* you. Make the interviewer want you first, and your bargaining position will be much stronger.

2. If your interviewer raises the salary question too early, before you've had a chance to create desire for your qualifications, *postpone* the question, saying something like, "Money is important to me, but it is not my main concern. Opportunity and growth are far more important. What I'd rather do, if you don't mind, is explore if I'm right for the position, and then talk about the money. Would that be okay?"

3. The #1 rule of any negotiation is, *the side with more information usually wins*. After you've done a thorough job of selling the interviewer and it's time to talk salary, the secret is to get

the employer talking about what he's willing to pay *before* you reveal what *you're* willing to accept. So, when asked about salary, respond by asking, "I'm sure the company has already established a salary range for this position. Could you tell me what that is?" Or, "I want an income commensurate with my ability and qualifications. I trust you'll be fair with me. What does the position pay?" Or, more simply, "What does the position pay?"

4. Know beforehand what you'd accept. To know what's reasonable, research the job market and this position for any relevant salary information. Remember that most executives look for a 20-30% pay boost when they switch jobs. If you're grossly underpaid, you may want more.

5. Never lie about what you currently make, but feel free to include the estimated cost of all your fringes, which could well tack on 25-50% more to your present "cash-only" salary.

Q. #55 The Illegal Question

TRAPS: Illegal questions include any regarding your age, number and ages of your children or other dependents, marital status, maiden name, religion, political affiliation, ancestry, national origin, birthplace, naturalization of your parents, spouse or children, diseases, disabilities, clubs, or spouse's *occupation...unless any of the above are directly related to your performance of the job*. You can't even be asked about arrests, though *you* can be asked about *convictions*.

BEST ANSWER: Under the ever-present threat of lawsuits, most interviewers are well aware of these taboos. Yet *you* may encounter, usually on a second or third interview, a senior executive who doesn't interview much and forgets he can't ask such questions.

You can handle an illegal question in several ways. First, you can assert your legal right not to answer. But this will frighten or embarrass your interviewer and destroy any rapport you had.

Second, you could swallow your concerns over privacy and answer the question straightforwardly if you feel the answer could actually help you. For example, your interviewer, a devout Baptist, recognizes you from church and mentions it. Here, *you* could gain by talking about your church.

Third, if you don't want your privacy invaded, you can diplomatically answer the *concern* behind the question without answering the question itself.

Example: If you are over 50 and are asked, "*How old are you?*", you can answer with a friendly, smiling question of your own on whether there's a concern that your age may affect your performance. Follow this up by reassuring the interviewer that there's nothing in this job you can't do and, in fact, your age and experience are *the most important advantages* you offer the employer for the following reasons...

Another example: If asked, "*Do you plan to have children?*", you could answer, "I am wholeheartedly dedicated to my career," perhaps adding, "I have no plans regarding children." (You needn't fear you've pledged eternal childlessness. You have every right to change you plans later. Get the job first and *then* enjoy all your options.)

Most important, remember that illegal questions arise from *fear* that you won't perform well. The best answer of all is to get the job and perform brilliantly. All concerns and fears will then vanish, replaced by respect and appreciation for your work.

Q. #56 The "Secret" Illegal Question

TRAPS: Much more frequent than the Illegal Question (*see Question #55*) is the **secret** illegal question. It's secret because it's asked only in the interviewer's mind. Since it's not even expressed to you, you have no way to respond to it, and it can therefore be most damaging.

Example: You're physically challenged, or a single mother returning to your professional career, or over 50, or a member of an ethnic minority, or fit any of a dozen other categories that do not strictly conform to the majority in a given company.

Your interviewer wonders, "Is this person really able to handle the job?"... "Is he or she a 'good fit' at a place like ours?" . . . "Will the chemistry ever be right with someone like this?" But the interviewer never raises such questions because they're illegal. So what can *you* do?

BEST ANSWER: Remember that just because the interviewer doesn't ask an illegal question doesn't mean he doesn't have it. More than likely, he is going to come up with his own answer. So you might as well help him out.

How? Well, you obviously can't respond to an illegal question he hasn't even asked. This may well offend him. And there's always the chance he wasn't even concerned about the issue until you brought it up, and only then begins to wonder.

So you can't address "secret" illegal questions *head-on*. But what you can do is make sure there's enough *counterbalancing* information to more than reassure him that there's no problem in the area he *may* be doubtful about.

For example, let's say you're a sales rep who had polio as a child and *you* need a cane to walk. *You* know your condition has never impeded your performance, yet you're concerned that your interviewer may secretly be wondering about your stamina or ability to travel. Well, make sure that you hit these abilities very hard, leaving no doubt about your capacity to handle them well.

So, too, if you're in any way different from what passes for "normal". Make sure, without in any way seeming *defensive* about yourself, that you mention strengths, accomplishments, preferences and affiliations that strongly counterbalance any unspoken concern your interviewer may have.

Q. #57 What was the toughest part of your last job?

TRAPS: this is slightly different from the question raised earlier, "*What's the most difficult part about being a (job title)*" because this asks what you *personally* have found most difficult in your last position. This question is more difficult to *redefine* into something positive. Your interviewer will assume that whatever you found toughest before may give you a problem in your new position.

BEST ANSWER: State that there was nothing in your prior position that you found overly difficult, and let your answer go at that. If pressed to expand your answer, you could describe the aspects of the position you enjoyed more than others, making sure that you express maximum enjoyment for those tasks most important to the open position, and *you* enjoyed least those tasks that are unimportant to the position at hand.

Q. #58 How do you define success...and how do you measure up to your own definition?

TRAPS: Seems like an obvious enough question. Yet many executives, unprepared for it, fumble the ball.

BEST ANSWER: Give a well-accepted definition of success that leads right into your own stellar collection of achievements.

Example: "The best definition I've come across is that success is the progressive realization of a worthy goal.

"As to how I would measure up to that definition, I would consider myself both successful and fortunate" (Then summarize your career goals and how your achievements have indeed represented a progressive path toward realization of your goals.).

Q. #59 "The Opinion Question" -

"What do you think about...abortion...The President...The Death Penalty... (Or any other controversial subject)?"

TRAPS: Obviously, these and other "opinion" questions should *never* be asked. Sometimes they come up over a combination dinner/interview when the interviewer has had a drink or two, is feeling relaxed, and is spouting off about something that bugged him in today's news.

If you give your opinion and it's opposite of his, you won't change his opinion, but you could easily lose the job offer.

BEST ANSWER: In all of these instances, just remember the tale about the student and the wise old rabbi. The scene is a seminary, where an overly serious student is pressing the rabbi to answer the ultimate questions of suffering, life and death. But no matter how hard he presses, the wise old rabbi will only answer each difficult question with a question of his own. In exasperation, the seminary student demands, "*Why, rabbi, do you always answer a question with another question?*" To which the rabbi responds, "*And why not?*"

If you are ever uncomfortable with any question, asking a question in return is the greatest escape hatch ever invented. It throws the onus back on the other person, sidetracks the discussion from going into an area of risk to you! and gives you time to think of your answer or, even better, your next question!

In response to any of the "opinion" questions cited above, merely responding, "*Why do you ask?*" will usually be enough to dissipate any pressure to give your opinion.

But if your interviewer again presses you for an opinion, you can ask another question.

Or you could assert a generality that almost everyone would agree with. For example, if your interviewer is complaining about politicians then suddenly turns to you and asks if you're a Republican or Democrat, you could respond by saying, "Actually, I'm finding it hard to find any politicians I like these days".

(Of course, your best question of all may be whether you want to work for someone so opinionated.)

Q. #60 If you won a \$10 million lottery, would you still work?

TRAPS: Your totally honest response might be, "*Hell, no, are you serious?*" That might be so, but any answer which shows you as fleeing work if given the chance could make you seem lazy. On the other hand, if you answer, "*Oh, I'd want to keep doing exactly what I am doing, only doing it for your firm,*" you could easily inspire your interviewer to silently mutter to himself, "*Yeah, sure. Gimme a break.*"

BEST ANSWER: This type of question is aimed at getting at your bedrock attitude about work and how you feel about what you do. Your best answer will focus on your positive feelings.

Example: "After I floated down from cloud nine, I think I would still hold my basic belief that achievement and purposeful work are essential to a happy, productive life. After all, if money alone bought happiness, then all rich people would all be happy, and that's not always true. "I love the work I do, and think I'd always want to be involved in my career in some fashion. Winning the lottery would make it more fun because it would mean having more flexibility, more options...who knows?"

"Of course, since I can't count on winning, I'd just as soon create my own destiny by sticking with what's worked for me, meaning good old reliable hard work and a desire to achieve. I think those qualities have built many more fortunes than all the lotteries put together."

Q. #61 Looking back on your last position, have you done your best work?

TRAPS: Tricky question. Answer, "*absolutely*", and it can seem like your best work is behind you. Answer, "*no, my best work is ahead of me*", and it can seem as if you didn't give it your all.

BEST ANSWER: To cover both possible paths this question can take, your answer should state that you always try to do your best, and the best of your career is right now. Like an athlete at the top of his game, you are just hitting your career stride thanks to several factors. Then, recap those factors, highlighting your strongest qualifications.

Q. #62 Why should I hire you from the outside when I could promote someone from within?

TRAPS: This question isn't as aggressive as it sounds. It represents the interviewer's own dilemma over this common problem. He's probably leaning toward you already and, for reassurance, wants to hear what you have to say on the matter.

BEST ANSWER: Help him see the qualifications that *only you* offer.

Example: "In general, I think it's a good policy to hire from within when possible. But the very fact that you decided to look outside probably means you're not completely comfortable choosing someone from inside.

"Naturally, you want this department to be as strong as it possibly can be, so you want the strongest candidate. I feel that I can fill that bill because...(then recap your strongest qualifications that match up with his greatest needs)."

Q. #63 Tell me something negative you've heard about our company...:

TRAPS: This is a common fishing expedition to see what the industry grapevine may be saying about the company. But it's also a trap because as an outsider, you never want to be the bearer of unflattering news or gossip about the firm. It can only hurt your chances and sidetrack the interviewer from getting sold on you.

BEST ANSWER: Just remember the rule - never be negative - and you'll handle this one just *fine*.

Q. #64 On a scale of one to ten, rate me as an interviewer.

TRAPS: Give a perfect "10", and you'll seem too easy to please. Give anything less than a perfect 10, and he could press you as to where you're being critical, and that road leads *downhill* for you.

BEST ANSWER: *Once* again, never be *negative*. The interviewer will only resent criticism coming from you. This is a time to show your positivism.

However, don't give a numerical rating. Simply praise whatever interview style he's been using.

If he's been tough, say, "You have been thorough and tough-minded, the very qualities most needed to conduct a good interview".

If he's been methodical, say, "You have been very methodical and analytical, and I'm sure that approach results in excellent hires for your firm".

In other words, pay him a sincere compliment *that he can believe* because it's anchored in the behavior you've just seen.

Performance-Based Interview (PBI) Questions

Categorized According to VHAs High Performance Development Model, Core Competencies, and Frequently Occurring KSAOs

[Return to Performance-Based Interviews](#)

January, 2001

1. Personal Mastery

- **Ability to organize work and function independently.**
 - Give me an example of an important goal that you had set in the past. What did you do to reach it? How did you measure your success in reaching that goal?
 - Tell me about a time you had to handle multiple responsibilities. How did you organize the work that you needed to do? Given that same situation, how would you organize the work differently to have achieved even greater success in handling the multiple responsibilities?
 - Tell me about a time when you accomplished something significant that wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been there to make it happen. What part did you play in making it happen? Were others involved and, if so, how did you interact with them?
 - Tell us about a time when your supervisor was absent and you had to make an important decision. Specifically, what was the situation you faced and what was the outcome of your decision?
 - Give an example of a time you had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done.
 - Tell me about a goal you set that took a long time to achieve or that you're still working towards. Why did you continue to work toward the goal? Why did it take so long?
 - Describe a time where you set a demanding goal for yourself and reached it. Did you encounter any obstacles and, if so, what were they? How did you overcome those obstacles? Why did you persevere in the face of these obstacles?
 - What is the hardest you ever had to work to achieve something? What made it the hardest? What motivated you to work that hard to achieve this end?
 - Give me an example of something you started that wasn't there before you initiated it. What was your role in bringing it to completion?
 - Give an example of a major contribution that you made to an ongoing effort. What motivated you? How did those with whom you were working receive it? What were the short term and long term outcomes?
 - What did you do in your last job to be effective in your organizing and planning? Be specific. What one thing could you have done to be even more effective?
- **Ability to plan and execute work.**
 - Tell of a time when you did not live up to your work expectations. How did you become aware and what were your reactions?
 - Tell me about a time when you successfully balanced several tasks at one time. How did you decide what to do first? In hindsight, was there a better way to have approached these tasks?

- Describe a project or task that didn't go as well as you would have liked. What did you learn and how will you apply that as you go forward?
- Identify three characteristics you feel you possess that make you an effective employee/leader/etc. Give an example of how each characteristic has been used effectively in your work setting.
- Tell me about a time when it was very difficult to plan your work. What made it difficult? How did you approach those difficulties?
- Tell me about a time when you had planned your work and then were confronted with a new priority. How did you react to having your plans disrupted? How did you adjust your plans to accommodate the new priority?
- **Ability to manage multiple priorities and respond to demands from several competing sources.**
 - Tell me about a time you had more to do than you had time available. How did you decide what to do first? What process did you use to prioritize the rest of the things you had to do?
 - Tell me about a time when you successfully balanced several tasks at one time. How did you decide what to do first?
 - 1) Tell me about the last time you had to "juggle" several responsibilities when you held a job. 2) What were those responsibilities? 3) How did you decide what priority to give to each responsibility? 4) What strategies helped you cope with multiple responsibilities?
 - Give an example of how you maintain a balance between personal and work mastery? Tell of a time when the balance was lost. Explain how you became aware and how you reacted.
- **Ability to demonstrate initiative in the resolution of complex problems and contingency situations.**
 - Give me an example of a complex problem that you helped resolve. How did you resolve it? What was your role?
 - With examples, explain specifically how you have identified problems, developed strategies for addressing the problems, and measured the success or failure of each strategy.
 - Tell of a time when you had to make a decision in a hurry and you lacked some information. What did you do? What was the outcome?
 - We can sometimes identify a small problem and fix it before it becomes a major problem. Give an example of a time when you resolved such a problem without direction from a supervisor. What was the problem, how did you resolve it, and why didn't you wait for a supervisor to tell you to deal with it?
 - Give me an example of a time when you resolved a complicated problem at work without such direction from a supervisor, or coworker. What prompted you to take the action? What action did you take? What was the result of your actions?
- **Ability to meet deadlines and work effectively under pressure.**
 - Give me an example of a time when you had an important project with a short deadline. What steps did you take to ensure that you did meet the deadline? What was the biggest obstacle to meeting the deadline? How did you overcome that obstacle?
 - Tell me about a time when you had several competing deadlines. How did you decide which project you worked on first?

- Tell me about a time that you were not able to complete several tasks with competing deadlines. How did you handle that situation? What would you do differently today?
- What is the most pressure-packed situation you have ever worked in? What did you do to cope with the pressures in that situation? How would you change what you did if confronted with that situation today?

2. Technical Skills

- **Ability to research, analyze, and prepare written reports, policies, and procedures.**
 - Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to gain information needed to solve a problem; then tell me how you analyzed the information, came to a decision, and produced a written report.
 - Tell me about the most difficult report you have had to research. What made it the most difficult? How did you approach obtaining the needed information?
 - Tell me about the most difficult information you have had to analyze before writing a report. What made it the most difficult. How did you analyze the information? Whose assistance did you seek to assist in the analysis? Were your conclusions accepted?
 - Tell us your experience and knowledge in developing a budget, monitoring fund control points and payment processing. Begin by telling us the size of the budget.
 - Tell about your experience in developing, implementing, and managing a _____ program. What mechanism did you have for reporting the activity and cost expenditure of the program? What problems did you have with the program and how did you deal with them?
 - On a scale of 0 to 10 with 0 being not competent and 10 being expert, rate yourself in the following areas: (a list of technical skills). Give a brief example to back your rating.
 - Tell us about a specific time when you had to NEGOTIATE with a group of people to obtain their cooperation. Tell us specifically how you negotiated with them and what the outcome was. What did you learn from the situation?
 - Describe a situation where you maintained records that were subject to review by an outside regulatory agency. How did you assure that standards were met? Give us an example of the outcome in the process of accreditation.
 - Tell us specifically what professional and personal activities you engaged in last year to enhance your knowledge and skills.
 - Outline how you have developed a strategic plan. Give examples of what you included in the plan and how you measured outcomes.
 - Give specific examples of how you have created a work environment for staff that fosters continuous learning and staff development.

3. Interpersonal Effectiveness

- **Ability to communicate orally.**
 - Describe a time you used verbal communication to relate a point that was important to you. What obstacles did you have to overcome in making this communication? Did the other party understand the point being made? How do you know they understood?
 - Tell me about a job experience in which you had to speak up and tell other people what you thought or felt? What did you do to prepare for this communication? What things did you consider in deciding upon the time and

place for this communication? What could you have done to make this communication more effective?

- Tell me about a time when you had to present a proposal to a person in authority and were able to do this successfully. What did you do to improve the effectiveness of this communication, to ensure it had a greater possibility of success?
 - Give an example of a time when you had to present an idea verbally for others' approval or agreement. Describe the communications strategy you used. What was the result?
 - Tell me about a time you had to communicate something that you knew that the other person did not want to hear. How did you go about communicating it? How successful was the communication?
 - Tell your experience in presenting to large and small groups as a representative of your organization.
 - Give an example where you did not communicate well. What was the outcome? What did you learn from the situation and what would you do differently?
- **Ability to communicate in writing.**
 - Tell me about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills to get an important point across. What was the most effective element in that communication? Why was it the most effective?
 - Tell your experience in writing policies and procedures for _____ program. How did you communicate the policies/procedures to others?
 - Describe the most significant written document or presentation that you completed. What made it the most significant? What was the document intended to accomplish? Did it accomplish its intended purpose?
 - Tell me about a time when you used your written communication skills to convey an important message. What was the most difficult aspect in preparing that communication? What was the easiest aspect? How successful was the communication? What could you do to improve that communication?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to present a written proposal to a person in authority and were able to do this successfully. What made the proposal successful?
 - Many jobs involve a written element that is important to the job. Describe your previous experience in writing two important documents that effectively provided guidance or explanation to your team or manager. What made them effective?
 - Give me an example of a time when you had to present an idea in written format for others' approval or agreement. What was the result?
- **Ability to communicate orally and in writing.**
 - Tell me about a time when you had to orally present a written proposal to a person in authority and were able to do this successfully. How did you present the information? What was the most effective portion of our presentation? What made it the most effective? How did the intended audience receive the presentation?
 - Describe the process you have used to develop and write a planning (or other type) document. Be specific. How was the plan communicated to different levels of your respective organization?
 - Give an example of a time when you had to present an idea for others' approval or agreement. What was the result?

- Tell me about a time in which you had to use your verbal and written communication skills in order to get an important point across. How did you decide what to present orally, and what to present in writing? Which portion was more effective? Why?
- **Ability to work harmoniously with others in a team environment to accomplish goals.**
 - Describe a time in which you felt it was necessary to modify or change your actions in order to respond to the needs of another person.
 - What did you do in your last job to contribute to a team environment? Be specific.
 - Tell me about a situation in which you were able to read another person or a group effectively. How did your perception assist in directing your actions? What was the outcome?
 - Give me a specific example of something you did that helped others have more enthusiasm for the project or effort of the team.
 - Tell of the most difficult situation you ever faced in getting along with a supervisor and/or subordinate employee. How did you work through the situation and what was the outcome?
 - Tell me about a difficult situation on a team when it was desirable for you to keep a positive attitude. What did you do? What were the effects of your actions?
 - Tell us your experience in leading a multi-disciplinary group of people. What was your goal with the team and how did you get others involved in meeting the goal? What was the outcome of the effort?
 - Describe your most recent group effort. What was your role in the group? What did you do to make the work of the group more effective?
 - Think about a time when you were involved in a group project or activity where the others involved were difficult to get along with. What did you do about it? Were your efforts effective? Would you do anything differently today?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to analyze a situation in order to be effective in guiding your action or decision. How did you do the analysis? What did your analysis tell you about the situation? How did you modify your actions or decisions based on that analysis?
 - Give me an example of a specific situation that illustrates how you most frequently deal with conflict when working with a team.
 - Tell me about a time when you were not successfully able to deal with conflict within a group of which you were a part. What efforts did you make to resolve the conflicts? What more might have you done?
 - Tell me about the last team of which you were a member. What was your role? How did your membership affect the function of the team? Be specific.
 - Describe the worst co-worker you have ever had. What made them the worst? How did you deal with him or her?
 - Let's talk about a time when you had to overcome an uncomfortable situation with others. What did you do to affect the situation?
 - Give me an example to show you've been able to develop and maintain productive working relations with others, even though they had different points of view?
 - Sometimes people disagree when working in teams. Give an example of a situation where you have been in a conflict situation and shown an ability to handle it effectively and still reach the team's goal?

- Describe a situation in which you were a member of a team with a specific goal. How did you reach your goal as a team? What was your individual role?
- Tell me about a time when you were working with a diverse group of people to accomplish something. How did that diversity affect the team, positively or negatively?
- In many situations you will need to work effectively with a wide variety of team members. Give an example of a situation where you have worked effectively with a team to reach a goal? What made your efforts with this team effective?
- Give me an example of building a productive relationship and maintaining it even in a difficult situation.
- 1) Tell me about a time in which you were gathering information from a person who was being uncooperative. 2) What was the situation? 3) Why were they being uncooperative? 4) How did you feel? 5) How did you get the information you needed? 6) What was the result in this situation?
- Describe a situation where you had to tell others things they did not want to hear. What was the result of the communication? If you had to do so again, what would you change in what you communicated or how you communicated? Why would you make the changes?
- **Ability to communicate effectively with a variety of people from different backgrounds.**
 - Tell me about a time when you were working with a diverse group of people to accomplish something. What barriers to effective communication did you find? How did you overcome those barriers?
 - By providing examples, convince us you can work with a wide variety of people, situations and environments.
 - In many situations you will need to work effectively with a wide variety of team members. Give an example of a situation where you have worked effectively with a team to reach a goal? What made your efforts with this team effective?
 - Give me an example to show you've been able to develop and maintain productive working relations with others, even though they have different points of view?
- **Ability to manage and supervise (e.g. plan, organize, delegate, control, review, and direct) the activities of subordinates.**
 - Tell me about a time when you were able to step into a situation, take charge, muster support, and bring about excellent results.
 - Tell me about a time when you had to make an unpopular decision and get others' commitment to it.
 - Please give examples of how you have exercised leadership within your medical center, at the level of the VISN, and at the national level.
 - Give an example of when you had a conflict with the leader of another service of your organization. What was the conflict about? How did you manage it and what was the outcome?
 - Give me an example of how you have assisted a subordinate to increase their motivation to perform at a higher level. What specifically did you do? How effective was that effort?
 - Give an example of how individualizing the way in which you deal with people has enabled you to supervise a difficult employee more effectively. What specifically did you do?

- Summarize a situation where you took the initiative to get others going on an important issue, and played a leading role to achieve the results wanted. Specifically what did you do?
 - Give me an example of a time when you were able to communicate successfully with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa). What did you do to enhance the communications and make them successful?
 - As a manager, have you ever had to discipline anyone? If so, what were the circumstances, and how did you handle it? How effective was the action taken? What could you have done to make it more effective?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to tell someone something you knew that they did not want to hear. How did you approach the communication? What was the most successful part of the communication? What was the least effective? What could you do to have improved the least effective?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to coordinate the work of others. How did you approach the task? What specifically did you do?
 - Tell me about a time where two of your subordinates or two team members were in conflict. How did you deal with that situation? How successful were you? What could you have done differently to make your intervention even more effective?
- **Ability to lead or actively participate in oral discussions in which the purpose was to influence, motivate, or question persons or groups.**
 - Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way. What made your efforts successful?
 - Give me an example of a time you had to persuade other people to take action. Were you successful? What could you have done to improve the effectiveness of the persuasive effort?
 - Tell me about a time where you had to make an unpopular decision and get others' commitment to it. What did you do specifically to get that commitment?
- **Ability to accomplish work through others.**
 - Give me an example of a time you had to persuade other people to take action. What specifically did you do to persuade them? Were you successful?
 - Tell me about the most successful delegation you have ever made. What did you delegate? What made it successful?
 - Tell me about the least successful delegation you have ever made. What did you delegate? What could you have done to improve the success of the delegation?
 - Tell me about a time when you empowered staff to handle duties in specific areas. How did they know they had been empowered? How did they react to that empowerment? What did you do to empower them?
- **Leadership abilities.**
 - Describe a team project in which you took a leadership role. What specifically did you do?
 - Discuss a time when your integrity was challenged. How did you handle it?
 - Give an example of a time you had to go above or beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done. What did you do? Why did you do it?

- Describe a situation in which you were able to influence positively the actions of others in a desired direction.
- Give me an example of a time you had to persuade other people to take action. What, specifically, did you do? Were you successful?
- Describe a situation in which you had an opportunity to provide leadership to a team or group without having direct management authority.
- Give me an example of a time when you were leading and influencing the direction of a project.
- What was your role? How many others worked with you on this project? What specifically did you contribute?
- Tell me about a situation where a team effort was heading for an unsuccessful conclusion and you were able to turn the impending failure into success. What did you do to change the direction of the group? What made your efforts successful?

4. Customer Service

- **Ability to communicate effectively in a customer service environment.**
 - Give me an example of when you had to work with a customer who was difficult to work with. Why was this person difficult? How did you deal with that person?
 - Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
 - Tell me about a situation in the past year in which you had to deal with a very upset customer. What did you do? What was the outcome?
 - Describe the most difficult customer situation you have dealt with. Tell us specifically how you worked with the customer and what the outcome of the situation was.
 - Describe a time in which you felt it was necessary to modify or change your actions in order to respond to the needs of another person. What made you feel it was necessary to modify your actions? What changes did you make?
 - Tell me about a situation in which you went the “extra mile” for a customer. What did you do? What prompted you to provide that level of service? What was the customer’s response to your efforts?
 - Tell about a situation in the past year in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker. What did you do? What was the outcome?

5. Flexibility/Adaptability

- **Ability to demonstrate flexibility/adaptability.**
 - Tell me about a time when you had to adjust to changes on the job. What happened? How did it turn out?
 - Describe a time when you had to reinvent or redefine your job to meet the changing needs of your organization. What steps did you take to increase the output of your position?
 - Think of a situation (in your role, job, or environment) that changed quickly. What did you do to adapt?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to adapt to an uncomfortable situation. How did you cope with the changes?
 - Provide us with a recent change in your organization that directly impacted areas you worked in or were responsible for. How did you personally manage the change. How did you work with others and what was the outcome?

- Tell me about a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy even though you did not agree with it.
 - Tell me about a time when you did not conform to existing policy because you thought the situation demanded a different behavior or action? What did you do?
 - Tell me about a difficult situation when it was desirable for you to keep a positive attitude. What did you do?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to balance many competing priorities and did so successfully.
 - Give an example of a job situation in which you demonstrated an ability to tolerate ambiguity without becoming paralyzed by it.
 - Many assignments require flexibility and versatility. In what situation have you shown flexibility or versatility in working through a problem or an assignment? How did this benefit your team or organization?
- **Ability to meet deadlines and work effectively under pressure.**
 - Give an example of a time you had to make a quick decision. What was the basis for that decision? In hindsight, how could that decision have been modified to improve it?
 - Describe a time on any past job in which you were faced with problems or stressful situations that tested your coping skills. What did you do?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to balance many competing priorities and did so successfully.
 - Tell me about a time that you were not able to work effectively under pressure. What have you done to improve your ability to work under pressure since that incident?

6. Creative Thinking

- **Demonstrated ability to problem-solve and function independently.**
 - Give me an example of a problem that you have solved that illustrates what steps you follow to study a problem before making a decision?
 - Give me an example of a time you had to make an important decision. How did you make the decision? How does it affect you today?
 - Describe a creative endeavor you can take credit for that impacted on the efficiency or effectiveness of a department or organization that you have worked for.
 - We can sometimes identify a small problem and fix it before it becomes a major problem. Give an example of how you have done this.
 - Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
 - Tell me about a recent problem that you faced in your job. What did you do to resolve it?
 - Tell me about a difficult problem you faced and how you solved it.
 - 1) What is the toughest problem that you as an individual have solved in a work setting? 2) What was the problem? 3) What was the result of your solution?
 - What is the most creative idea you have ever conceived and implemented? What made it creative?
 - Give me an example of a situation where you had to overcome major obstacles to achieve your objectives. What did you do to overcome the obstacles?

- Give me an example of a time you had a problem and you approached it in an unusual way to solve it.
 - What is an example of a situation where you made significant improvement in a work area for which you were responsible
- **Identify and analyze problems, find alternative solutions to complex problems, and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information to make logical judgments.**
 - Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to gain information needed to solve a problem and then tell me how you analyzed the information and came to a decision.
 - 1) Tell me about a time when you had to analyze facts quickly, define the key issues, and develop a plan that produced good results. 2) If you had to do that activity over again, how would you do it differently?
 - Tell me about a time when you had to gather data, analyze the facts, and develop an action plan based on the data.
 - Many assignments can involve deciphering complex instructions and taking appropriate action. Describe a previous work experience in which you had occasion to tackle a complex situation and analyze it, simplify it and come up with an action plan to move forward.
 - 1) Tell me about the last time that you recognized a problem in an organization in which you were involved. 2) How did you recognize the problem? 3) How did you study the problem? 4) How did you determine a solution to the problem?
- **Ability to demonstrate creativity and innovation.**
 - Describe a creative/innovative idea that you produced which led to a significant contribution to the success of an activity or project.
 - Describe the most creative project at work that you've ever completed.
 - Tell me about a situation in which you were able to find a new and better way of doing something significant.
 - Think of a problem solving effort in which you were involved. What was your biggest contribution to the solution?
 - Tell me about a time when you saw something succeed and reapplied the idea in a different context to help improve something else
 - Tell me about a time when you came up with a new idea that was implemented. What was the result?
 - What is an example of a situation where you made significant improvement?
 - Describe a significant success you had in a previous work assignment and how it positively impacted your organization.
 - Describe a previous work experience in which you met with an initial failure and found a way to overcome it and reach success. What steps did you take in order to reach success?

7. Systems Thinking

- **Ability to analyze organizational and operational problems and develop solutions.**
 - Give me an example of how you have studied an operational problem in your organization that illustrates the steps you follow to study a problem before making a decision?

- Describe a problem situation where you had to seek out information on the impact of a change in one area upon the entire organization, define key issues, and decide on which steps to take to get desired results.
- Tell me about a time when you implemented a change in one portion of the organization that negatively impacted another part of the organization. How did you deal with the resulting problems? What would you do differently to implement that change now?
- Tell me about a time when you had to pick out the key elements in some activity and take steps to improve the success of those elements.
- Describe a significant success you had in a previous work assignment and how it positively impacted your organization.
- Explain the work of a committee you can take ownership for in terms of successes or outcomes.

8. Organizational Stewardship

- **Works to accomplish the organization's business plan.**
 - Give me an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done. What did you do? Why did you put forth that extra effort?
 - Tell me about a time when others in your organization depended on you and you did not deliver. What impact did that have on the organization? What would you do differently today?
 - Tell me about a time when others in your organization depended on you and you did deliver. What impact did that have on the organization? What impact did that have on your area of responsibility?
 - Describe a significant success you had in a previous work assignment and how it positively impacted your organization.
 - If you retired today, what contribution would you be best remembered for by your organization? How did it help further the goals of the organization?

The STAR Interview

Situation or Task	Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, from a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.
Action you took	Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did -- not the efforts of the team. Don't tell what you might do, tell what you did.
Results you achieved	What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?

Sample Questions:

Here is one list of sample behavioral-based interview questions:

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Please discuss an important written document you were required to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split second decision.
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.
- Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- Tell me about a difficult decision you've made in the last year.
- Give me an example of a time when something you tried to accomplish and failed.
- Give me an example of when you showed initiative and took the lead.
- Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker.
- Give me an example of a time when you motivated others.
- Tell me about a time when you delegated a project effectively.

- Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures.
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.
- Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low).

Sample STAR Story: **Behavioral Interviewing Story**

One strategy for preparing for behavioral interviews is to use the STAR Technique (often referred to as the SAR and PAR techniques as well):

Situation (S) or Task (T):

Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, *the Stetson Reporter*, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

Action (A):

I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of *Reporter* circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set-up a special training session for the account executives with a School of Business Administration professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

Result (R):

We signed contracts with 15 former advertisers for daily ads and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20 percent [quantities are always good] over the same period last year.